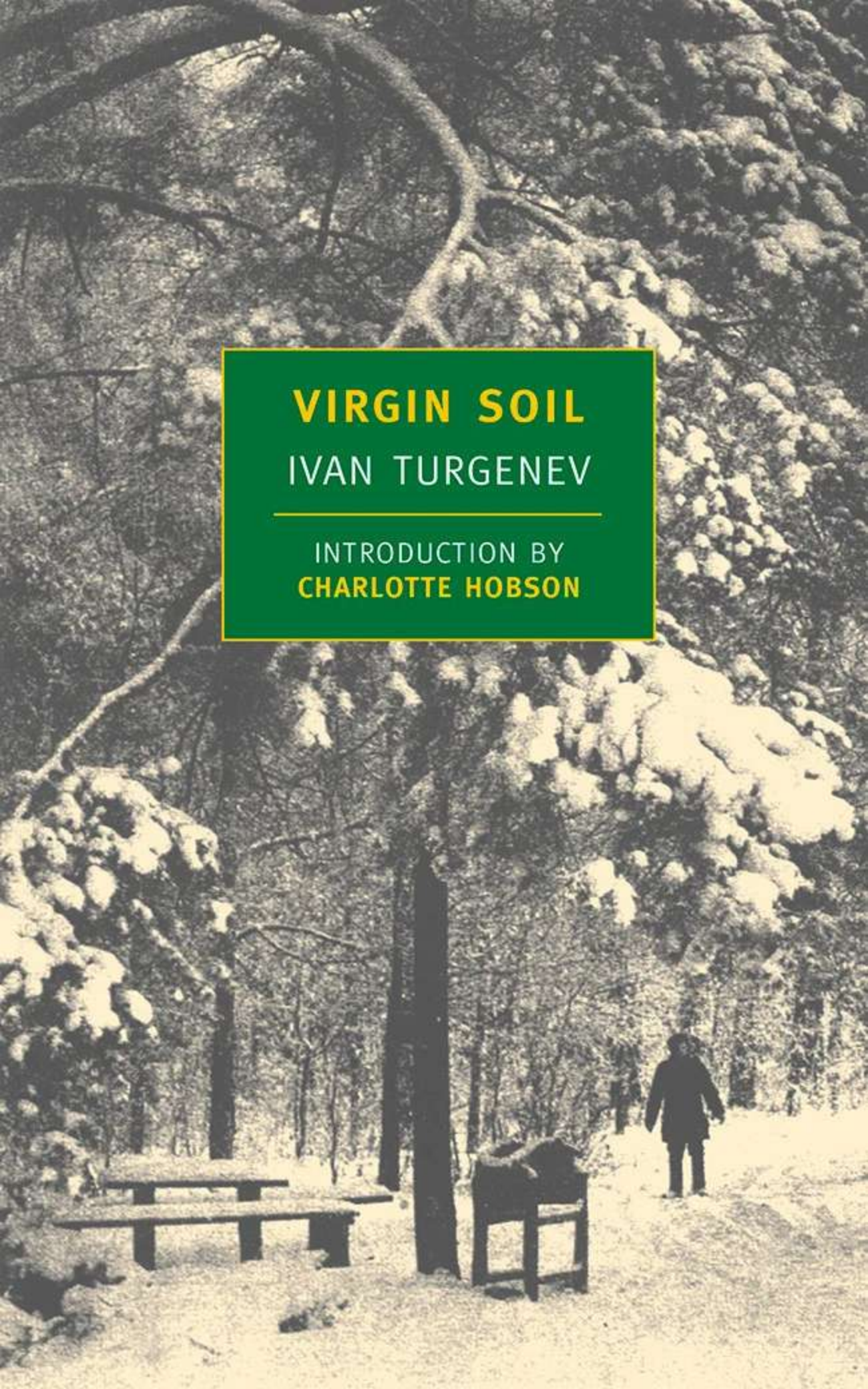
VIRGIN SOIL
IVAN TURGENEV
INTRODUCTION BY
CHARLOTTE HOBSON

Virgin Soil

Turgenev, Ivan Sergeyevich
(Translator: R. S. Townsend)

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About Turgenev:

Ivan Sergeyevich Turgenev (November 9 [O.S. October 28] 1818 – September 3 [O.S. August 22] 1883) was a major Russian novelist and playwright. His novel Fathers and Sons is regarded as a major work of 19th-century fiction.

Source: Wikipedia

Also available on Feedbooks for Turgenev:

- *Fathers and Sons* (1862)
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Introduction

TURGENEV was the first writer who was able, having both Slavic and universal imagination enough for it, to interpret modern Russia to the outer world, and Virgin Soil was the last word of his greater testament. It was the book in which many English readers were destined to make his acquaintance about a generation ago, and the effect of it was, like Swinburne's Songs Before Sunrise, Mazzini's Duties of Man, and other congenial documents, to break up the insular confines in which they had been reared and to enlarge their new horizon. Afterwards they went on to read Tolstoi, and Turgenev's powerful and antipathetic fellow- novelist, Dostoievsky, and many other Russian writers: but as he was the greatest artist of them all, his individual revelation of his country's predicament did not lose its effect. Writing in prose he achieved a style of his own which went as near poetry as narrative prose can do. without using the wrong music: while over his realism or his irony he cast a tinge of that mixed modern and oriental fantasy which belonged to his temperament. He suffered in youth, and suffered badly, from the romantic malady of his century, and that other malady of Russia, both expressed in what M. Haumand terms his "Hamletisme." But in Virgin Soil he is easy and almost negligent master of his instrument, and though he is an exile and at times a sharply embittered one, he gathers experience round his theme as only the artist can who has enriched leis art by having outlived his youth without forgetting its pangs, joys, mortifications, and love-songs.

In Nejdanov it is another picture of that youth which we see— youth reduced to ineffectiveness by fatalism and by the egoism of the lyric nature which longs to gain dramatic freedom, but cannot achieve it. It is one of a series of portraits, wonderfully traced psychological studies of the Russian dreamers and incompatibles of last mid-century, of which the most moving figure is the hero of the earlier novel, Dimitri Rudin. If we cared to follow Turgenev strictly in his growth and contemporary relations, we ought to begin with his Sportsman's Note Book. But so far as his novels go, he is the last writer to be taken chronologically. He was old enough in youth to understand old age in the forest, and young enough in age to provide his youth with fresh hues for another incarnation. Another element of his work which is very finely revealed .and brought to a rare point of characterisation in Virgin Soil, is the prophetic intention he had of the woman's part in the new order. For the real hero of the tale, as Mr. Edward Garnett has pointed out in an essay on

Turgenev, is not Nejdanov and not Solomin; the part is cast in the woman's figure of Mariana who broke the silence of "anonymous Russia." Ivan Turgenev had the understanding that goes beneath the old delimitation of the novelist hide-bound by the law—"male and female created he them."

He had the same extreme susceptibility to the moods of nature. He loved her first for herself, and then with a sense of those inherited primitive associations with her scenes and hid influences which still play upon us to-day; and nothing could be surer than the wilder or tamer glimpses which are seen in this book and in its landscape settings of the characters. But Russ as he is, he never lets his scenery hide his people: he only uses it to enhance them. He is too great an artist to lose a human trait, as we see even in a grotesque vignette like that of Fomishka and Fimishka, or a chance picture like that of the Irish girl once seen by Solomin in London.

Turgenev was born at Orel, son of a cavalry colonel, in ISIS. He died in exile, like his early master in romance Heine—that is in Paris-on the 4th of September, 1883. But at his own wish his remains were carried home and buried in the Volkoff Cemetery, St. Petersburg. The grey crow he had once seen in foreign fields and addressed in a fit of homesickness

"Crow, crow, You are grizzled, I know, But from Russia you come; Ah me, there lies home!"

called him back to his mother country, whose true son he remained despite all he suffered at her hands, and all the delicate revenges of the artistic prodigal that he was tempted to take.

E. R.

Chapter 1

AT one o'clock in the afternoon of a spring day in the year 1868, a young man of twenty-seven, carelessly and shabbily dressed, was toiling up the back staircase of a five-storied house on Officers Street in St. Petersburg. Noisily shuffling his down-trodden goloshes and slowly swinging his heavy, clumsy figure, the man at last reached the very top flight and stopped before a half-open door hanging off its hinges. He did not ring the bell, but gave a loud sigh and walked straight into a small, dark passage.

"Is Nejdanov at home?" he called out in a deep, loud voice.

"No, he's not. I'm here. Come in," an equally coarse woman's voice responded from the adjoining room.

"Is that Mashurina?" asked the newcomer.

"Yes, it is I. Are you Ostrodumov?

"Pemien Ostrodumov," he replied, carefully removing his goloshes, and hanging his shabby coat on a nail, he went into the room from whence issued the woman's voice.

It was a narrow, untidy room, with dull green coloured walls, badly lighted by two dusty windows. The furnishings consisted of an iron bedstead standing in a corner, a table in the middle, several chairs, and a bookcase piled up with books. At the table sat a woman of about thirty. She was bareheaded, clad in a black stuff dress, and was smoking a cigarette. On catching sight of Ostrodumov she extended her broad, red hand without a word. He shook it, also without saying anything, dropped into a chair and pulled a half-broken cigar out of a side pocket. Mashurina gave him a light, and without exchanging a single word, or so much as looking at one another, they began sending out long, blue puffs into the stuffy room, already filled with smoke.

There was something similar about these two smokers, although their features were not a bit alike. In these two slovenly figures, with their

coarse lips, teeth, and noses (Ostrodumov was even pock-marked), there was something honest and firm and persevering.

"Have you seen Nejdanov?" Ostrodumov asked.

"Yes. He will be back directly. He has gone to the library with some books."

Ostrodumov spat to one side.

"Why is he always rushing about nowadays? One can never get hold of him."

Mashurina took out another cigarette.

"He's bored," she remarked, lighting it carefully.

"Bored!" Ostrodumov repeated reproachfully. "What self- indulgence! One would think we had no work to do. Heaven knows how we shall get through with it, and he complains of being bored!"

"Have you heard from Moscow?" Mashurina asked after a pause.

"Yes. A letter came three days ago."

"Have you read it?"

Ostrodumov nodded his head.

"Well? What news?

"Some of us must go there soon."

Mashurina took the cigarette out of her mouth.

"But why?" she asked. "They say everything is going on well there."

"Yes, that is so, but one man has turned out unreliable and must be got rid of. Besides that, there are other things. They want you to come too."

"Do they say so in the letter?"

"Yes."

Mashurina shook back her heavy hair, which was twisted into a small plait at the back, and fell over her eyebrows in front.

"Well," she remarked; "if the thing is settled, then there is nothing more to be said."

"Of course not. Only one can't do anything without money, and where are we to get it from?"

Mashurina became thoughtful.

"Nejdanov must get the money," she said softly, as if to herself.

"That is precisely what I have come about," Ostrodumov observed.

"Have you got the letter?" Mashurina asked suddenly.

"Yes. Would you like to see it?"

"I should rather. But never mind, we can read it together presently."

"You need not doubt what I say. I am speaking the truth," Ostrodumov grumbled.

"I do not doubt it in the least." They both ceased speaking and, as before, clouds of smoke rose silently from their mouths and curled feebly above their shaggy heads.

A sound of goloshes was heard from the passage.

"There he is," Mashurina whispered.

The door opened slightly and a head was thrust in, but it was not the head of Nejdanov.

It was a round head with rough black hair, a broad wrinkled forehead, bright brown eyes under thick eyebrows, a snub nose and a humorously-set mouth. The head looked round, nodded, smiled, showing a set of tiny white teeth, and came into the room with its feeble body, short arms, and bandy legs, which were a little lame. As soon as Mashurina and Ostrodumov caught sight of this head, an expression of contempt mixed with condescension came over their faces, as if each was thinking inwardly, "What a nuisance!" but neither moved nor uttered a single word. The newly arrived guest was not in the least taken aback by this reception, however; on the contrary it seemed to amuse him.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked in a squeaky voice. "A duet? Why not a trio? And where's the chief tenor?

"Do you mean Nejdanov, Mr. Paklin?" Ostrodumov asked solemnly.

"Yes, Mr. Ostrodumov."

"He will be back directly, Mr. Paklin."

"I am glad to hear that, Mr. Ostrodumov."

The little cripple turned to Mashurina. She frowned, and continued leisurely puffing her cigarette.

"How are you, my dear … my dear … I am so sorry. I always forget your Christian name and your father's name."

Mashurina shrugged her shoulders.

"There is no need for you to know it. I think you know my surname. What more do you want? And why do you always keep on asking how I am? You see that I am still in the land of the living!"

"Of course!" Paklin exclaimed, his face twitching nervously. "If you had been elsewhere, your humble servant would not have had the pleasure of seeing you here, and of talking to you! My curiosity is due to a bad, old-fashioned habit. But with regard to your name, it is awkward, somehow, simply to say Mashurina. I know that even in letters you only sign yourself Bonaparte! I beg pardon, Mashurina, but in conversation, however—"

"And who asks you to talk to me, pray?"

Paklin gave a nervous, gulpy laugh.

"Well, never mind, my dear. Give me your hand. Don't be cross. I know you mean well, and so do I… Well?

Paklin extended his hand, Mashurina looked at him severely and extended her own.

"If you really want to know my name," she said with the same expression of severity on her face, "I am called Fiekla."

"And I, Pemien," Ostrodumov added in his bass voice.

"How very instructive! Then tell me, 0h Fiekla! and you, Oh Pemien! why you are so unfriendly, so persistently unfriendly to me when I—"

"Mashurina thinks," Ostrodumov interrupted him, "and not only Mashurina, that you are not to be depended upon, because you always laugh at everything."

Paklin turned round on his heels.

"That is the usual mistake people make about me, my dear Pemien! In the first place, I am not always laughing, and even if I were, that is no reason why you should not trust me. In the second, I have been flattered with your confidence on more than one occasion before now, a convincing proof of my trustworthiness. I am an honest man, my dear Pemien."

Ostrodumov muttered something between his teeth, but Paklin continued without the slightest trace of a smile on his face.

"No, I am not always laughing! I am not at all a cheerful person. You have only to look at me!"

Ostrodumov looked at him. And really, when Paklin was not laughing, when he was silent, his face assumed a dejected, almost scared expression; it became funny and rather sarcastic only when he opened his lips. Ostrodumov did not say anything, however, and Paklin turned to Mashurina again.

"Well? And how are your studies getting on? Have you made any progress in your truly philanthropical art? Is it very hard to help an inexperienced citizen on his first appearance in this world?

"It is not at all hard if he happens to be no bigger than you are!" Mashurina retorted with a self-satisfied smile. (She had quite recently passed her examination as a midwife. Coming from a poor aristocratic family, she had left her home in the south of Russia about two years before, and with about twelve shillings in her pocket had arrived in Moscow, where she had entered a lying- in institution and had worked very hard to gain the necessary certificate. She was unmarried and very chaste. "No wonder!" some sceptics may say (bearing in mind the description of her personal appearance; but we will permit ourselves to say that it was wonderful and rare).

Paklin laughed at her retort.

"Well done, my dear! I feel quite crushed! But it serves me right for being such a dwarf! I wonder where our host has got to?"

Paklin purposely changed the subject of conversation, which was rather a sore one to him. He could never resign himself to his small stature, nor indeed to the whole of his unprepossessing figure. He felt it all the more because he was passionately fond of women and would have given anything to be attractive to them. The consciousness of his pitiful appearance was a much sorer point with him than his low origin and unenviable position in society. His father, a member of the lower middle class, had, through all sorts of dishonest means, attained the rank of titular councillor. He had been fairly successful as an intermediary in legal matters, and managed estates and house property. He had made a moderate fortune, but had taken to drink towards the end of his life and had left nothing after his death.

Young Paklin, he was called Sila—Sila Samsonitch, [Meaning strength, son of Samson] and always regarded this name as a joke against himself, was educated in a commercial school, where he had acquired a good knowledge of German. After a great many difficulties he had entered an office, where he received a salary of five hundred roubles a year, out of which he had to keep himself, an invalid aunt, and a humpbacked sister. At the time of our story Paklin was twenty-eight years old. He had a great many acquaintances among students and young people, who liked him for his cynical wit, his harmless, though biting, self-confident speeches, his one-sided, unpedantic, though genuine, learning, but occasionally they sat on him severely. Once, on arriving late at a political

meeting, he hastily began excusing himself. "Paklin was afraid!" some one sang out from a corner of the room, and everyone laughed. Paklin laughed with them, although it was like a stab in his heart. "He is right, the blackguard!" he thought to himself. Nejdanov he had come across in a little Greek restaurant, where he was in the habit of taking his dinner, and where he sat airing his rather free and audacious views. He assured everyone that the main cause of his democratic turn of mind was the bad Greek cooking, which upset his liver.

"I wonder where our host has got to? " he repeated. "He has been out of sorts lately. Heaven forbid that he should be in love!

Mashurina scowled.

"He has gone to the library for books. As for falling in love, he has neither the time nor the opportunity."

"Why not with you?" almost escaped Paklin's lips.

"I should like to see him, because I have an important matter to talk over with him," he said aloud.

"What about?" Ostrodumov asked. "Our affairs?"

"Perhaps yours; that is, our common affairs."

Ostrodumov hummed. He did not believe him. "Who knows? He's such a busy body," he thought.

"There he is at last!" Mashurina exclaimed suddenly, and her small unattractive eyes, fixed on the door, brightened, as if lit up by an inner ray, making them soft and warm and tender.

The door opened, and this time a young man of twenty-three, with a cap on his head and a bundle of books under his arm, entered the room. It was Nejdanov himself.

Chapter 2

AT the sight of visitors he stopped in the doorway, took them in at a glance, threw off his cap, dropped the books on to the floor, walked over to the bed, and sat down on the very edge. An expression of annoyance and displeasure passed over his pale handsome face, which seemed even paler than it really was, in contrast to his dark-red, wavy hair.

Mashurina turned away and bit her lip; Ostrodumov muttered, "At last!"

Paklin was the first to approach him.

"Why, what is the matter, Alexai Dmitritch, Hamlet of Russia? Has something happened, or are you just simply depressed, without any particular cause?

"Oh, stop! Mephistopheles of Russia!" Nejdanov exclaimed irritably. "I am not in the mood for fencing with blunt witticisms just now."

Paklin laughed.

"That's not quite correct. If it is wit, then it can't be blunt. If blunt, then it can't be wit."

"All right, all right! We know you are clever!

"Your nerves are out of order," Paklin remarked hesitatingly. "Or has something really happened?"

"Oh, nothing in particular, only that it is impossible to show one's nose in this hateful town without knocking against some vulgarity, stupidity, tittle-tattle, or some horrible injustice. One can't live here any longer!"

"Is that why your advertisement in the papers says that you want a place and have no objection to leaving St. Petersburg? " Ostrodumov asked.

"Yes. I would go away from here with the greatest of pleasure, if some fool could be found who would offer me a place!"

"You should first fullfil your duties here," Mashurina remarked significantly, her face still turned away.

"What duties?" Nejdanov asked, turning towards her.

Mashurina bit her lip. "Ask Ostrodumov."

Nejdanov turned to Ostrodumov. The latter hummed and hawed, as if to say, "Wait a minute."

"But seriously," Paklin broke in, "have you heard any unpleasant news?"

Nejdanov bounced up from the bed like an india-rubber ball. "What more do you want?" he shouted out suddenly, in a ringing voice. "Half of Russia is dying of hunger! The Moscow News is triumphant! They want to introduce classicism, the students' benefit clubs have been closed, spies everywhere, oppression, lies, betrayals, deceit! And it is not enough for him! He wants some new unpleasantness! He thinks that I am joking… . Basanov has been arrested," he added, lowering his voice. "I heard it at the library."

Mashurina and Ostrodumov lifted their heads simultaneously.

"My dear Alexai Dmitritch," Paklin began, "you are upset, and for a very good reason. But have you forgotten in what times and in what country we are living? Amongst us a drowning man must himself create the straw to clutch at. Why be sentimental over it? One must look the devil straight in the face and not get excited like children—"

"Oh, don't, please!" Nejdanov interrupted him desperately, frowning as if in pain. "We know you are energetic and not afraid of anything—"

"I—not afraid of anything?" Paklin began.

"I wonder who could have betrayed Basanov? "Nejdanov continued. "I simply can't understand!"

"A friend no doubt. Friends are great at that. One must look alive! I once had a friend, who seemed a good fellow; he was always concerned about me and my reputation. 'I say, what dreadful stories are being circulated about you!' he would greet me one day. 'They say that you poisoned your uncle and that on one occasion, when you were introduced into a certain house, you sat the whole evening with your back to the hostess and that she was so upset that she cried at the insult! What awful nonsense! What fools could possibly believe such things!' Well, and what do you think? A year after I quarrelled with this same friend, and in his farewell letter to me he wrote, 'You who killed your own uncle! You who were not ashamed to insult an honourable lady by

sitting with your back to her,' and so on and so on. Here are friends for you!"

Ostrodumov and Mashurina exchanged glances.

"Alexai Dmitritch!" Ostrodumov exclaimed in his heavy bass voice; he was evidently anxious to avoid a useless discussion. "A letter has come from Moscow, from Vassily Nikolaevitch."

Nejdanov trembled slightly and cast down his eyes.

"What does he say? " he asked at last.

"He wants us to go there with her." Ostrodumov indicated to Mashurina with his eyebrows.

"Do they want her too?'

"Yes."

"Well, what's the difficulty?

"Why, money, of course."

Nejdanov got up from the bed and walked over to the window.

"How much do you want?"

"Not less than fifty roubles."

Nejdanov was silent.

"I have no money just now," he whispered at last, drumming his fingers on the window pane, "but I could get some. Have you got the letter?"

"Yes, it … that is … certainly… "

"Why are you always trying to keep things from me?" Paklin exclaimed. "Have I not deserved your confidence? Even if I were not fully in sympathy with what you are undertaking, do you think for a moment that I am in a position to turn around or gossip?"

"Without intending to, perhaps," Ostrodumov remarked.

"Neither with nor without intention! Miss Mashurina is looking at me with a smile … but I say—"

"I am not smiling!" Mashurina burst out.

"But I say," Paklin went on, "that you have no tact. You are utterly incapable of recognising your real friends. If a man can laugh, then you think that he can't be serious—"

"Is it not so?" Mashurina snapped.

"You are in need of money, for instance," Paklin continued with new force, paying no attention to Mashurina; "Nejdanov hasn't any. I could get it for you."

Nejdanov wheeled round from the window.

"No, no. It is not necessary. I can get the money. I will draw some of my allowance in advance. Now I recollect, they owe me something. Let us look at the letter, Ostrodumov."

Ostrodumov remained motionless for a time, then he looked around, stood up, bent down, turned up one of the legs of his trousers, and carefully pulled a piece of blue paper out of his high boot, blew at it for some reason or another, and handed it to Nejdanov. The latter took the piece of paper, unfolded it, read it carefully, and passed it on to Mashurina. She stood up, also read it, and handed it back to Nejdanov, although Paklin had extended his hand for it. Nejdanov shrugged his shoulders and gave the secret letter to Paklin. The latter scanned the paper in his turn, pressed his lips together significantly, and laid it solemnly on the table. Ostrodumov took it, lit a large match, which exhaled a strong odour of sulphur, lifted the paper high above his head, as if showing it to all present, set fire to it, and, regardless of his fingers, put the ashes into the stove. No one moved or pronounced a word during this proceeding; all had their eyes fixed on the floor. Ostrodumov looked concentrated and business-like, Nejdanov furious, Paklin intense, and Mashurina as if she were present at holy mass.

About two minutes went by in this way, everyone feeling uncomfortable. Paklin was the first to break the silence.

"Well?" he began. "Is my sacrifice to be received on the altar of the fatherland? Am I permitted to bring, if not the whole at any rate, twenty-five or thirty roubles for the common cause?"

Nejdanov flared up. He seemed to be boiling over with annoyance, which was not lessened by the solemn burning of the letter—he was only waiting for an opportunity to burst out.

"I tell you that I don't want it, don't want, don't want it! I'll not allow it and I'll not take it! I can get the money. I can get it at once. I am not in need of anyone's help!

"My dear Alexai," Paklin remarked, "I see that you are not a democrat in spite of your being a revolutionist!"

"Why not say straight out that I'm an aristocrat?"

"So you are up to a certain point."

Nejdanov gave a forced laugh.

"I see you are hinting at the fact of my being illegitimate. You can save yourself the trouble, my dear boy. I am not likely to forget it."

Paklin threw up his arms in despair.

"Aliosha! What is the matter with you? How can you twist my words so? I hardly know you today."

Nejdanov shrugged his shoulders.

"Basanov's arrest has upset you, but he was so careless—"

He did not hide his convictions," Mashurina put in gloomily. "It is not for us to sit in judgment upon him!"

"Quite so; only he might have had a little more consideration for others, who are likely to be compromised through him now."

"What makes you think so?" Ostrodumov bawled out in his turn. "Basanov has plenty of character, he will not betray anyone. Besides, not every one can be cautious you know, Mr. Paklin."

Paklin was offended and was about to say something when Nejdanov interrupted him.

"I vote we leave politics for a time, ladies and gentlemen!" he exclaimed.

A silence ensued.

"I ran across Skoropikin today," Paklin was the first to begin. "Our great national critic, aesthetic, and enthusiast! What an insufferable creature! He is forever boiling and frothing over like a bottle of sour kvas. A waiter runs with it, his finger stuck in the bottle instead of a cork, a fat raisin in the neck, and when it has done frothing and foaming there is nothing left at the bottom but a few drops of some nasty stuff, which far from quenching any one's thirst is enough to make one ill. He's a most dangerous person for young people to come in contact with."

Paklin's true and rather apt comparison raised no smile on his listeners' faces, only Nejdanov remarked that if young people were fools enough to interest themselves in aesthetics, they deserved no pity whatever, even if Skoropikin did lead them astray.

"Of course," Paklin exclaimed with some warmth—the less sympathy he met with, the more heated he became—" I admit that the question is not a political one, but an important one, nevertheless. According to Skoropikin, every ancient work of art is valueless because it is old. If that were true, then art would be reduced to nothing more or less than mere

fashion. A preposterous idea, not worth entertaining. If art has no firmer foundation than that, if it is not eternal, then it is utterly useless. Take science, for instance. In mathematics do you look upon Euler, Laplace, or Gauss as fools? Of course not. You accept their authority. Then why question the authority of Raphael and Mozart? I must admit, however, that the laws of art are far more difficult to define than the laws of nature, but they exist just the same, and he who fails to see them is blind, whether he shuts his eyes to them purposely or not."

Paklin ceased, but no one uttered a word. They all sat with tightly closed mouths as if feeling unutterably sorry for him.

"All the same," Ostrodumov remarked, " I am not in the least sorry for the young people who run after Skoropikin."

"You are hopeless," Paklin thought. "I had better be going."

He went up to Nejdanov, intending to ask his opinion about smuggling in the magazine, the "Polar Star", from abroad (the "Bell" had already ceased to exist), but the conversation took such a turn that it was impossible to raise the question. Paklin had already taken up his hat, when suddenly, without the slightest warning, a wonderfully pleasant, manly baritone was heard from the passage. The very sound of this voice suggested something gentle, fresh, and well-bred.

"Is Mr. Nejdanov at home?"

They all looked at one another in amazement.

"Is Mr. Nejdanov at home?" the baritone repeated.

"Yes, he is," Nejdanov replied at last.

The door opened gently and a man of about forty entered the room and slowly removed his glossy hat from his handsome, closely cropped head. He was tall and well-made, and dressed in a beautiful cloth coat with a gorgeous beaver collar, although it was already the end of April. He impressed Nejdanov and Paklin, and even Mashurina and Ostrodumov, with his elegant, easy carriage and courteous manner. They all rose instinctively on his entrance.

Chapter 3

THE elegantly dressed man went up to Nejdanov with an amiable smile and began: "I have already had the pleasure of meeting you and even speaking to you, Mr. Nejdanov, the day before yesterday, if you remember, at the theatre." (The visitor paused, as though waiting for Nejdanov to make some remark, but the latter merely bowed slightly and blushed.) "I have come to see you about your advertisement, which I noticed in the paper. I should like us to have a talk if your visitors would not mind… " (He bowed to Mashurina, and waved a grey-gloved hand in the direction of Paklin and Ostrodumov.)

"Not at all," Nejdanov replied awkwardly. "Won't you sit down?"

The visitor bowed from the waist, drew a chair to himself, but did not sit down, as every oneelse was standing. He merely gazed around the room with his bright though half-closed eyes.

"Goodbye, Alexai Dmitritch," Mashurina exclaimed suddenly. "I will come again presently."

"And I too," Ostrodumov added.

Mashurina did not take the slightest notice of the visitor as she passed him, but went straight up to Nejdanov, gave him a hearty shake of the hand, and left the room without bowing to anyone. Ostrodumov followed her, making an unnecessary noise with his boots, and snorting out once or twice contemptuously, "There's a beaver collar for you!"

The visitor accompanied them with a polite though slightly inquisitive look, and then directed his gaze to Paklin, hoping the latter would follow their example, but Paklin withdrew into a corner and settled down. A peculiarly suppressed smile played on his lips ever since the appearance of the stranger. The visitor and Nejdanov also sat down.

"My name is Sipiagin. You may perhaps have heard of me," the visitor began with modest pride.

We must first relate how Nejdanov had met him at the theatre.

There had been a performance of Ostrovsky's play "Never Sit in Another Man's Sledge", on the occasion of the great actor Sadovsky's coming from Moscow. Rusakov, one of the characters in the play, was known to be one of his favourite parts. Just before dinner on that day, Nejdanov went down to the theatre to book a ticket, but found a large crowd already waiting there. He walked up to the desk with the intention of getting a ticket for the pit, when an officer, who happened to be standing behind him, thrust a three-rouble note over Nejdanov's head and called out to the man inside: "He" (meaning Nejdanov) "will probably want change. I don't. Give me a ticket for the stalls, please. Make haste, I'm in a hurry!"

"Excuse me, sir, I want a ticket for the stalls myself!Nejdanov exclaimed, throwing down a three-rouble note, all the ready money he possessed. He got his ticket, and in the evening appeared in the aristocratic part of the Alexandrinsky Theatre.

He was badly dressed, without gloves and in dirty boots. He was uncomfortable and angry with himself for feeling uncomfortable. A general with numerous orders glittering on his breast sat on his right, and on his left this same elegant Sipiagin, whose appearance two days later at Nejdanov's so astonished Mashurina and Ostrodumov. The general stared at Nejdanov every now and again, as though at something indecent, out of place, and offensive. Sipiagin looked at him sideways, but did not seem unfriendly. All the people surrounding him were evidently personages of some importance, and as they all knew one another, they kept exchanging remarks, exclamations, greetings, occasionally even over Nejdanov's head. He sat there motionless and ill at ease in his spacious armchair, feeling like an outcast. Ostrovsky's play and Sadovsky's acting afforded him but little pleasure, and he felt bitter at heart. When suddenly, Oh wonder! During one of the intervals, his neighbour on the left, not the glittering general, but the other with no marks of distinction on his breast, addressed him politely and kindly, but somewhat timidly. He asked him what he thought of Ostrovsky's play, wanted to know his opinion of it as a representative of the new generation. Nejdanov, overwhelmed and half frightened, his heart beating fast, answered at first curtly, in monosyllables, but soon began to be annoyed with his own excitement. "After all," he thought, " am I not a man like everybody else? "And began expressing his opinions quite freely, without any restraint. He got so carried away by his subject, and spoke so loudly, that he quite alarmed the order-bedecked general. Nejdanov was a strong admirer of Ostrovsky, but could not help feeling, in spite of the author's great

genius, his evident desire to throw a slur on modern civilisation in the burlesqued character of Veherov, in "Never Sit in Another Man's Sledge".

His polite neighbour listened to him attentively, evidently interested in what he said. He spoke to him again in the next interval, not about the play this time, but about various matters of everyday life, about science, and even touched upon political questions. He was decidedly interested in his eloquent young companion. Nejdanov did not feel in the least constrained as before, but even began to assume airs, as if saying, "If you really want to know, I can satisfy your curiosity!" The general's annoyance grew to indignation and even suspicion.

After the play Sipiagin took leave of Nejdanov very courteously, but did not ask his name, neither did he tell him his own. While waiting for his carriage, he ran against a friend, a certain Prince G., an aide-de-camp.

"I watched you from my box," the latter remarked, through a perfumed moustache. "Do you know whom you were speaking to?"

"No. Do you? A rather clever chap. Who is he?"

The prince whispered in his ear in French. "He is my brother … . illegitimate… . His name is Nejdanov. I will tell you all about it someday. My father did not in the least expect that sort of thing, that was why he called him Nejdanov. [The unexpected.] But he looked after him all right. Il lui a fait un sort. We make him an allowance to live on. He is not stupid. Had quite a good education, thanks to my father. But he has gone quite off the track—I think he's a republican. We refuse to have anything to do with him. Il est impossible. Goodbye, I see my carriage is waiting."

The prince separated.

The next day Sipiagin noticed Nejdanov's advertisement in the paper and went to see him.

"My name is Sipiagin," he repeated, as he sat in front of Nejdanov, surveying him with a dignified air. "I see by your advertisement that you are looking for a post, and I should like to know if you would be willing to come to me. I am married and have a boy of eight, a very intelligent child, I may say. We usually spend the summer and autumn in the country, in the province of S., about five miles from the town of that name. I should like you to come to us for the vacation to teach my boy Russian history and grammar. I think those were the subjects you mentioned in your advertisement. I think you will get on with us all right, and I am sure you will like the neighbourhood. We have a large house and garden, the air is excellent, and there is a river close by. Well, would you

like to come? We shall only have to come to terms, although I do not think," he added, with a slight grimace, "that there will be any difficulty on that point between us."

Nejdanov watched Sipiagin all the time he was speaking. He gazed at his small head, bent a little to one side, his low, narrow, but intelligent forehead, his fine Roman nose, pleasant eyes, straight lips, out of which his words flowed graciously; he gazed at his drooping whiskers, kept in the English fashion, gazed and wondered. "What does it all mean?" he asked himself. "Why has this man come to seek me out? This aristocrat and I! What have we in common? What does he see in me?"

He was so lost in thought that he did not open his lips when Sipiagin, having finished speaking, evidently awaited an answer. Sipiagin cast a look into the corner where Paklin sat, also watching him. "Perhaps the presence of a third person prevents him from saying what he would like," flashed across Sipiagin's mind. He raised his eyebrows, as if in submission to the strangeness of the surroundings he had come to of his own accord, and repeated his question a second time.

Nejdanov started.

"Of course," he began hurriedly, "I should like to… with pleasure … . only I must confess … I am rather surprised … having no recommendations … and the views I expressed at the theatre were more calculated to prejudice you—"

"There you are quite mistaken Alexai—Alexai Dmitritch—have I got the name right?" Sipiagin asked with a smile. "I may venture to say that I am well known for my liberal and progressive opinions. On the contrary, what you said the other evening, with the exception perhaps of any youthful characteristics, which are always rather given to exaggeration, if you will excuse my saying so, I fully agreed with, and was even delighted with your enthusiasm."

Sipiagin spoke without the slightest hesitation, his words flowing from him as a stream.

"My wife shares my way of thinking," he continued. "her views are, if anything, more like yours than mine, which is not surprising, considering that she is younger than I am. When I read your name in the paper the day after our meeting—and by the way, you announced your name and address contrary to the usual custom—I was rather struck by the coincidence, having already heard it at the theatre. It seemed to me like the finger of fate. Excuse my being so superstitious. As for

recommendations, I do not think they are necessary in this case. I, like you, am accustomed to trusting my intuition. May I hope that you will come?"

"Yes, I will come," Nejdanov replied, "and will try to be worthy of your confidence. But there is one thing I should like to mention. I could undertake to teach your boy, but am not prepared to look after him. I do not wish to undertake anything that would interfere with my freedom."

Sipiagin gave a slight wave of the hand, as if driving away a fly.

"You may be easy on that point. You are not made that way. I only wanted a tutor, and I have found one. Well, now, how about terms? Financial terms, that is. Base metal!"

Nejdanov did not know what to say.

"I think," Sipiagin went on, bending forward and touching Nejdanov with the tips of his fingers, "that decent people can settle such things in two words. I will give you a hundred roubles a month and all travelling expenses. Will you come?

Nejdanov blushed.

"That is more than I wanted to ask … because I—"

"Well," Sipiagin interrupted him, "I look upon the matter as settled, and consider you as a member of our household." He rose from his chair, and became quite gay and expansive, as if he had just received a present. A certain amiable familiarity, verging on the playful, began to show itself in all his gestures. " We shall set out in a day or two," he went on, in an easy tone. "There is nothing I love better than meeting spring in the country, although I am a busy, prosaic sort of person, tied to town… I want you to count your first month as beginning from today. My wife and boy have already started, and are probably in Moscow by now. We shall find them in the lap of nature. We will go alone, like two bachelors, ha, ha!" Sipiagin laughed coquettishly, through his nose. "And now—"

He took a black and silver pocketbook out of his overcoat pocket and pulled out a card.

"This is my address. Come and see me tomorrow at about twelve o'clock. We can talk things over further. I should like to tell you a few of my views on education. We can also decide when to start."

Sipiagin took Nejdanov's hand. "By the way," he said, lowering his voice and bending his head a little to one side, "if you are in need of money, please do not stand on ceremony. I can let you have a month's pay in advance."

Nejdanov was at a loss to know what to say. He gazed, with the same puzzled expression, at the kind, bright face, which was so strange yet so close to him, smiling encouragingly.

"You are not in need of any?" Sipiagin asked in a whisper.

"I will tell you tomorrow, if I may," Nejdanov said at last.

"Well, goodbye, then. Till tomorrow." Sipiagin dropped Nejdanov's hand and turned to go out.

"I should like to know," Nejdanov asked suddenly, "who told you my name? You said you heard it at the theatre."

"Someone who is very well known to you. A relative of yours, I think. Prince G."

"The aide-de-camp?"

"Yes."

Nejdanov flushed even redder than before, but did not say anything. Sipiagin shook his hand again, without a word this time, then bowing first to him and then to Paklin, put on his hat at the door, and went out with a self-satisfied smile on his lips, denoting the deep impression the visit must have produced upon him.

Chapter 4

SIPIAGIN had barely crossed the threshold when Paklin jumped up, and rushing across to Nejdanov began showering congratulations upon him.

"What a fine catch!" he exclaimed laughing, scarcely able to stand still. "Do you know who he is? He's quite a celebrity, a chamberlain, one of our pillars of society, a future minister!"

"I have never heard of him," Nejdanov remarked dejectedly.

Paklin threw up his arms in despair.

"That's just where we are mistaken, Alexai Dmitritch! We never know anyone. We want to do things, to turn the whole world upside down, and are living outside this very world, amidst two or three friends, jostling each other in our narrow little circle!

"Excuse me," Nejdanov put in. "I don't think that is quite true. We certainly do not go amongst the enemy, but are constantly mixing with our own kind, and with the masses."

"Just a minute! " Paklin interrupted, in his turn. "Talking of enemies reminds me of Goethe's lines—

Wer den Dichter will versteh'n Muss im Dichter's lands geh'n.

and I say—

Wer den Feinde will versteh'n Muss im Feinde's lands geh'n.

To turn one's back on one's enemies, not to try and understand their manner of life, is utterly stupid! Yes, utterly stu-pid! If I want to shoot a wolf in the forest, I must first find out his haunts. You talked of coming in contact with the people just now. My dear boy! In 1862 the Poles formed their revolutionary bands in the forest; we are just about to enter that same forest, I mean the people, where it is no less dark and dense than in the other."

"Then what would you have us do?"

"The Hindus cast themselves under the wheels of the Juggernaut," Paklin continued; "they were mangled to pieces and died in ecstasy. We, also, have our Juggernaut—it crushes and mangles us, but there is no ecstasy in it."

"Then what would you have us do?" Nejdanov almost screamed at him. "Would you have us write preachy novels?

Paklin folded his arms and put his head on one side.

"You, at any rate, could write novels. You have a decidedly literary turn of mind. All right, I won't say anything about it. I know you don't like it being mentioned. I know it is not very exciting to write the sort of stuff wanted, and in the modern style too. "'Oh, I love you," she bounded—'"

"It's all the same to me," he replied, scratching himself.

"That is precisely why I advise you to get to know all sorts and conditions, beginning from the very highest. We must not be entirely dependent on people like Ostrodumov! They are very honest, worthy folk, but so hopelessly stupid! You need only look at our friend. The very soles of his boots are not like those worn by intelligent people. Why did he hurry away just now? Only because he did not want to be in the same room with an aristocrat, to breathe the same air—"

"Please don't talk like that about Ostrodumov before me!" Nejdanov burst out. "He wears thick boots because they are cheaper!"

"I did not mean it in that sense," Paklin began.

"If he did not wish to remain in the same room with an aristocrat," Nejdanov continued, raising his voice, "I think it very praiseworthy on his part, and what is more, he is capable of sacrificing himself, will face death, if necessary, which is more than you or I will ever do!

Paklin made a sad grimace, and pointed to his scraggy, crippled legs.

"Now do I look like a warrior, my dear Alexai Dmitritch? But enough of this. I am delighted that you met this Sipiagin, and can even foresee something useful to our cause as a result of it. You will find yourself in the highest society, will come in contact with those wonderful beauties one hears about, women with velvety bodies on steel springs, as it says in "Letters on Spain". Get to know them, my dear fellow. If you were at all inclined to be an Epicurean, I should really be afraid to let you go. But those are not the objects with which you are going, are they?"

"I am going away," Nejdanov said, "to earn my living. And to get away from you all," he added to himself.

"Of course, of course! That is why I advise you to learn. Fugh! What a smell this gentleman has left behind him!" Paklin sniffed the air. "The very ambrosia that the governor's wife longed for in Gogol's 'Revisor'!"

"He discussed me with Prince G.," Nejdanov remarked dejectedly. "I suppose he knows my whole history now."

"You need not suppose; you may be quite sure of it! But what does it matter? I wouldn't mind betting that that was the very reason for his wanting to engage you. You will be able to hold your own with the best of them. You are an aristocrat yourself by blood, and consequently an equal. However, I have stayed too long. I must go back to the exploiter's, to my office. Goodbye."

Paklin went to the door, but stopped and turned back.

"I say, Aliosha," he began in a persuasive tone of voice, you have only just refused me, and I know you will not be short of money now; but, all the same, do allow me to sacrifice just a little for the cause. I can't do anything else, so let me help with my pocket! I have put ten roubles on the table. Will you take them?"

Nejdanov remained motionless, and did not say anything. "Silence means consent! Thanks!" Paklin exclaimed gaily and vanished.

Nejdanov was left alone. He continued gazing out into the narrow, gloomy court, unpenetrated by the sun even in summer, and he felt sad and gloomy at heart.

We already know that Nejdanov's father was Prince G., a rich adjutant-general. His mother was the daughter of the general's governess, a pretty girl who died on the day of Nejdanov's birth. He received his early education in a boarding school kept by a certain Swiss, a very energetic and severe pedagogue, after which he entered the university. His great ambition was to study law, but his father, who had a violent hatred for nihilists, made him go in for history and philology, or for "aesthetics" as Nejdanov put it with a bitter smile. His father used to see him about four times a year in all, but was, nevertheless, interested in his welfare, and when he died, left him a sum of six thousand roubles "in memory of Nastinka" his mother. Nejdanov received the interest on this money from his brothers the Princes G., which they were pleased to call an allowance.

Paklin had good reason to call him an aristocrat. Everything about him betokened his origin. His tiny ears, hands, feet, his small but fine features, delicate skin, wavy hair; his very voice was pleasant, although it

was slightly guttural. He was highly strung, frightfully conceited, very susceptible, and even capricious. The false position he had been placed in from childhood had made him sensitive and irritable, but his natural generosity had kept him from becoming suspicious and mistrustful. This same false position was the cause of an utter inconsistency, which permeated his whole being. He was fastidiously accurate and horribly squeamish, tried to be cynical and coarse in his speech, but was an idealist by nature. He was passionate and pure-minded, bold and timid at the same time, and, like a repentant sinner, ashamed of his sins; he was ashamed alike of his timidity and his purity, and considered it his duty to scoff at all idealism. He had an affectionate heart, but held himself aloof from everybody, was easily exasperated, but never bore ill-will. He was furious with his father for having made him take up "aesthetics," openly interested himself in politics and social questions, professed the most extreme views (which meant more to him than mere words), but secretly took a delight in art, poetry, beauty in all its manifestations, and in his inspired moments wrote verses. It is true that he carefully hid the copy-book in which they were written, and none of his St. Petersburg friends, with the exception of Paklin, and he only by his peculiar intuitiveness, suspected its existence. Nothing hurt or offended Nejdanov more than the smallest allusion to his poetry, which he regarded as an unpardonable weakness in himself. His Swiss schoolmaster had taught him a great many things, and he was not afraid of hard work. He applied himself readily and zealously, but did not work consecutively. All his friends loved him. They were attracted by his natural sense of justice, his kindness, and his pure- mindedness, but Nejdanov was not born under a lucky star, and did not find life an easy matter. He was fully conscious of this fact and felt utterly lonely in spite of the untiring devotion of his friends.

He stood meditating at the window. Sad, oppressive thoughts rose up in his mind one after another about the prospective journey, the new and unexpected change that was coming into his life. He had no regrets at the thought of leaving St. Petersburg, as he would leave nothing behind that was especially dear to him, and he knew that he would be back in the autumn; but he was pervaded by the spirit of indecision, and an involuntary melancholy came over him.

"A fine tutor I shall make!" flashed across his mind. "Am I cut out for a schoolmaster?" He was ready to reproach himself for having undertaken the duties of a tutor, and would have been unjust in doing so. Nejdanov was sufficiently cultured, and, in spite of his uncertain temperament,

children grew readily fond of him and he of them. His depression was due to that feeling which takes possession of one before any change of place, a feeling experienced by all melancholy, dreaming people and unknown to those of energetic, sanguine temperaments, who always rejoice at any break in the humdrum of their daily existence, and welcome a change of abode with pleasure. Nejdanov was so lost in his meditations that his thoughts began quite unconsciously to take the form of words. His wandering sensations began to arrange themselves into measured cadences.

"Damn!" he exclaimed aloud. "I'm wandering off into poetry!" He shook himself and turned away from the window. He caught sight of Paklin's ten-rouble note, put it in his pocket, and began pacing up and down the room.

"I must get some money in advance," he thought to himself. "What a good thing this gentleman suggested it. A hundred roubles … a hundred from my brothers—their excellencies… . I want fifty to pay my debts, fifty or seventy for the journey—and the rest Ostrodumov can have. Then there are Paklin's ten roubles in addition, and I dare say I can get something from Merkulov—"

In the midst of these calculations the rhythmic cadences began to reassert themselves. He stood still, as if rooted to the spot, with fixed gaze. After a while his hands involuntarily found their way to the table drawer, from which he pulled out a much- used copy-book. He dropped into a chair with the same fixed look, humming softly to himself and every now and again shaking back his wavy hair, began writing line after line, sometimes scratching out and rewriting.

The door leading into the passage opened slightly and Mashurina's head appeared. Nejdanov did not notice her and went on writing. Mashurina stood looking at him intently for some time, shook her head, and drew it back again. Nejdanov sat up straight, and suddenly catching sight of her, exclaimed with some annoyance: "Oh, is that you?" and thrust the copy-book into the drawer again.

Mashurina came into the room with a firm step.

"Ostrodumov asked me to come," she began deliberately.

"He would like to know when we can have the money. If you could get it today, we could start this evening."

"I can't get it today," Nejdanov said with a frown. Please come tomorrow."

"At what time?"

"Two o'clock."

"Very well."

Mashurina was silent for a while and then extended her hand.

"I am afraid I interrupted you. I am so sorry. But then… I am going away… who knows if we shall ever meet again… I wanted to say good-bye to you."

Nejdanov pressed her cold, red fingers. "You know the man who was here today," he began. "I have come to terms with him, and am going with him. His place is down in the province of S., not far from the town itself."

A glad smile lit up Mashurina's face.

"Near S. did you say? Then we may see each other again perhaps. They might send us there!" Mashurina sighed. "Oh, Alexai Dmitritch—"

"What is it?" Nejdanov asked.

Mashurina looked intense.

"Oh, nothing. Goodbye. It's nothing." She squeezed Nejdanov's hand a second time and went out.

"There is not a soul in St. Petersburg who is so attached to me as this eccentric person," he thought. " I wish she had not interrupted me though. However, I suppose it's for the best."

The next morning Nejdanov called at Sipiagin's townhouse and was shown into a magnificent study, furnished in a rather severe style, but quite in keeping with the dignity of a statesman of liberal views. The gentleman himself was sitting before an enormous bureau, piled up with all sorts of useless papers, arrayed in the strictest order, and numerous ivory paper-knives, which had never been known to cut anything. During the space of an hour Nejdanov listened to the wise, courteous, patronising speeches of his host, received a hundred roubles, and ten days later was leaning back in the plush seat of a reserved first- class compartment, side by side with this same wise, liberal politician, being borne along to Moscow on the jolting lines of the Nikolaevsky Railway.

Chapter 5

IN the drawing room of a large stone house with a Greek front— built in the twenties of the present century by Sipiagin's father, a well-known landowner, who was distinguished by the free use of his fists—Sipiagin's wife, Valentina Mihailovna, a very beautiful woman, having been informed by telegram of her husband's arrival, sat expecting him every moment. The room was decorated in the best modern taste. Everything in it was charming and inviting, from the wails hung in variegated cretonne and beautiful curtains, to the various porcelain, bronze, and crystal knickknacks arranged upon the tables and cabinets; the whole blending together into a subdued harmony and brightened by the rays of the May sun, which was streaming in through the wide-open windows. The still air, laden with the scent of lily-of-the- valley (large bunches of these beautiful spring flowers were placed about the room), was stirred from time to time by a slight breeze from without, blowing gently over the richly grown garden.

What a charming picture! And the mistress herself, Valentina Mihailovna Sipiagina, put the finishing touch to it, gave it meaning and life. She was a tall woman of about thirty, with dark brown hair, a fresh dark complexion, resembling the Sistine Madonna, with wonderfully deep, velvety eyes. Her pale lips were somewhat too full, her shoulders perhaps too square, her hands rather too large, but, for all that, anyone seeing her as she flitted gracefully about the drawing room, bending from her slender waist to sniff at the flowers with a smile on her lips, or arranging some Chinese vase, or quickly readjusting her glossy hair before the looking-glass, half-closing her wonderful eyes, anyone would have declared that there could not be a more fascinating creature.

A pretty curly-haired boy of about nine burst into the room and stopped suddenly on catching sight of her. He was dressed in a Highland costume, his legs bare, and was very much befrizzled and pomaded.

"What do you want, Kolia?" Valentina Mihailovna asked. Her voice was as soft and velvety as her eyes.

"Mamma," the boy began in confusion, "auntie sent me to get some lilies-of-the-valley for her room… . She hasn't got any—"

Valentina Mihailovna put her hand under her little boy's chin and raised his pomaded head.

"Tell auntie that she can send to the gardener for flowers. These are mine. I don't want them to be touched. Tell her that I don't like to upset my arrangements. Can you repeat what I said?"

"Yes, I can," the boy whispered.

"Well, repeat it then."

"I will say … I will say … that you don't want."

Valentina Mihailovna laughed, and her laugh, too, was soft.

"I see that one can't give you messages as yet. But never mind, tell her anything you like."

The boy hastily kissed his mother's hand, adorned with rings, and rushed out of the room.

Valentina Mihailovna looked after him, sighed, walked up to a golden wire cage, on one side of which a green parrot was carefully holding on with its beak and claws. She teased it a little with the tip of her finger, then dropped on to a narrow couch, and picking up a number of the "Revue des Deux Mondes" from a round carved table, began turning over its pages.

A respectful cough made her look round. A handsome servant in livery and a white cravat was standing by the door.

"What do you want, Agafon?" she asked in the same soft voice.

"Simion Petrovitch Kollomietzev is here. Shall I show him in?

"Certainly. And tell Mariana Vikentievna to come to the drawing room."

Valentina Mihailovna threw the "Revue des Deux Mondes" on the table, raised her eyes upwards as if thinking—a pose which suited her extremely.

From the languid, though free and easy, way in which Simion Petrovitch Kollomietzev, a young man of thirty-two, entered the room; from the way in which he brightened suddenly, bowed slightly to one side, and drew himself up again gracefully; from the manner in which he

spoke, not too harshly, nor too gently; from the respectful way in which he kissed Valentina Mihailovna's hand, one could see that the newcomer was not a mere provincial, an ordinary rich country neighbour, but a St. Petersburg grandee of the highest society. He was dressed in the latest English fashion. A corner of the coloured border of his white cambric pocket handkerchief peeped out of the breast pocket of his tweed coat, a monocle dangled on a wide black ribbon, the pale tint of his suede gloves matched his grey checked trousers. He was clean shaven, and his hair was closely cropped. His features were somewhat effeminate, with his large eyes, set close together, his small flat nose, full red lips, betokening the amiable disposition of a well-bred nobleman. He was effusion itself, but very easily turned spiteful, and even vulgar, when any one dared to annoy him, or to upset his religious, conservative, or patriotic principles. Then he became merciless. All his elegance vanished like smoke, his soft eyes assumed a cruel expression, ugly words would flow from his beautiful mouth, and he usually got the best of an argument by appealing to the authorities.

His family had once been simple gardeners. His great-grandfather was called Kolomientzov after the place in which he was born; his grandfather used to sign himself Kolomietzev; his father added another I and wrote himself Kollomietzev, and finally Simion Petrovitch considered himself to be an aristocrat of the bluest blood, with pretensions to having descended from the well-known Barons von Gallenmeier, one of whom had been a field-marshal in the Thirty Years' War. Simion Petrovitch was a chamberlain, and served in the ministerial court. His patriotism had prevented him from entering the diplomatic service, for which he was cut out by his personal appearance, education, knowledge of the world, and his success with women. Mais quitter la Russie? Jamais! Kollomietzev was rich and had a great many influential friends. He passed for a promising, reliable young man un peu feodal dans ses opinions, as Prince B. said of him, and Prince B. was one of the leading lights in St. Petersburg official circles. Kollomietzev had come away on a two months' leave to look after his estate, that is, to threaten and oppress his peasants a little more. "You can't get on without that!" he used to say.

"I thought that your husband would have been here by now," he began, rocking himself from one leg to the other. He suddenly drew himself up and looked down sideways—a very dignified pose.

Valentina Mihailovna made a grimace.

"Would you not have come otherwise?"

Kollomietzev drew back a pace, horrified at the imputation.

"Valentina Mihailovna!" he exclaimed. "How can you possibly say such a thing?"

"Well, never mind. Sit down. My husband will be here soon. I have sent the carriage to the station to meet him. If you wait a little, you will be rewarded by seeing him. What time is it?

"Half-past two," Kollomietzev replied, taking a large gold enamelled watch out of his waistcoat pocket and showing it to Valentina Mihailovna. "Have you seen this watch? A present from Michael, the Servian Prince Obrenovitch. Look, here are his initials. We are great friends— go out hunting a lot together. Such a splendid fellow, with an iron hand, just what an administrator ought to be. He will never allow himself to be made a fool of. Not he! Oh dear no!"

Kollomietzev dropped into an armchair, crossed his legs, and began leisurely pulling off his left glove.

"We are badly in need of such a man as Michael in our province here," he remarked.

"Why? Are you dissatisfied with things here?"

Kollomietzev made a wry face.

"It's this abominable county council! What earthly use is it? Only weakens the government and sets people thinking the wrong way." (He gesticulated with his left hand, freed from the pressure of the glove.) "And arouses false hopes." (Kollomietzev blew on his hand.) "I have already mentioned this in St. Petersburg, mais bah! They won't listen to me. Even your husband- -but then he is known to be a confirmed liberal!"

Valentina Mihailovna sat up straight.

"What do I hear? You opposed to the government, Monsieur Kollomietzev?

"I— not in the least! Never! What an idea! Mais j'ai mon franc parler. I occasionally allow myself to criticise, but am always obedient."

"And I, on the contrary, never criticise and am never obedient."

"Ah! Mais c'est un mot! Do let me repeat it to my friend Ladislas. Vous savez, he is writing a society novel, read me some of it. Charming! Nous aurons enfin le grand monde russe peint par lui-meme."

"Where is it to be published?

"In the "Russian Messenger", of course. It is our "Revue des Deux Mondes". I see you take it, by the way."

"Yes, but I think it rather dull of late."

"Perhaps, perhaps it is. "The Russian Messenger", too, has also gone off a bit, using a colloquial expression.

Kollomietzev laughed. It amused him to have said "gone off a bit." "Mais c'est un journal qui se respecte," he continued, "and that is the main thing. I am sorry to say that I interest myself very little in Russian literature nowadays. It has grown so horribly vulgar. A cook is now made the heroine of a novel. A mere cook, parole d'honneur! Of course, I shall read Ladislas' novel. Il y aura le petit mot pour rire, and he writes with a purpose! He will completely crush the nihilists, and I quite agree with him. His ideas sont tres correctes."

"That is more than can be said of his past," Valentina Mihailovna remarked.

"Ah! jeton une voile sur les erreurs de sa jeunesse!" Kollomietzev exclaimed, pulling off his other glove.

Valentina Mihailovna half-closed her exquisite eyes and looked at him coquettishly.

"Simion Petrovitch!" she exclaimed, "why do you use so many French words when speaking Russian? It seems to me rather old- fashioned, if you will excuse my saying so."

"But, my dear lady, not everyone is such a master of our native tongue as you are, for instance. I have a very great respect for the Russian language. There is nothing like it for giving commands or for governmental purposes. I like to keep it pure and uncorrupted by other languages and bow before Karamzin; but as for an everyday language, how can one use Russian? For instance, how would you say, in Russian, de tout a l'heure, c'est un mot? You could not possibly say 'this is a word,' could you?"

"You might say 'a happy expression.'"

Kollomietzev laughed.

"A happy expression! My dear Valentina Mihailovna. Don't you feel that it savours of the schoolroom; that all the salt has gone out of it?

"I am afraid you will not convince me. I wonder where Mariana is?" She rang the bell and a servant entered.

"I asked to have Mariana Vikentievna sent here. Has she not been told?
"

The servant had scarcely time to reply when a young girl appeared behind him in the doorway. She had on a loose dark blouse, and her hair was cut short. It was Mariana Vikentievna Sinitska, Sipiagin's niece on the mother's side.

Chapter 6

"I am sorry, Valentina Mihailovna," Mariana said, drawing near to her, "I was busy and could not get away."

She bowed to Kollomietzev and withdrew into a corner, where she sat down on a little stool near the parrot, who began flapping its wings as soon as it caught sight of her.

"Why so far away, Mariana?" Valentina Mihailovna asked, looking after her. "Do you want to be near your little friend? Just think, Simion Petrovitch," she said, turning to Kollomietzev, "our parrot has simply fallen in love with Mariana!"

"I don't wonder at it!"

"But he simply can't bear me!"

"How extraordinary! Perhaps you tease him."

"Oh, no, I never tease him. On the contrary, I feed him with sugar. But he won't take anything out of my hand. It is a case of sympathy and antipathy."

Mariana looked sternly at Valentina Mihailovna and Valentina Mihailovna looked at her. These two women did not love one another.

Compared to her aunt Mariana seemed plain. She had a round face, a large aquiline nose, big bright grey eyes, fine eyebrows, and thin lips. Her thick brown hair was cut short; she seemed retiring, but there was something strong and daring, impetuous and passionate, in the whole of her personality. She had tiny little hands and feet, and her healthy, lithesome little figure reminded one of a Florentine statuette of the sixteenth century. Her movements were free and graceful.

Mariana's position in the Sipiagin's house was a very difficult one. Her father, a brilliant man of Polish extraction, who had attained the rank of general, was discovered to have embezzled large state funds. He was tried and convicted, deprived of his rank, nobility, and exiled to Siberia. After some time he was pardoned and returned, but was too utterly

crushed to begin life anew, and died in extreme poverty. His wife, Sipiagin's sister, did not survive the shock of the disgrace and her husband's death, and died soon after. Uncle Sipiagin gave a home to their only child, Mariana. She loathed her life of dependence and longed for freedom with all the force of her upright soul. There was a constant inner battle between her and her aunt. Valentina Mihailovna looked upon her as a nihilist and freethinker, and Mariana detested her aunt as an unconscious tyrant. She held aloof from her uncle and, indeed, from everyone else in the house. She held aloof, but was not afraid of them. She was not timid by nature.

"Antipathy is a strange thing," Kollomietzev repeated. "Everybody knows that I am a deeply religious man, orthodox in the fullest sense of the word, but the sight of a priest's flowing locks drives me nearly mad. It makes me boil over with rage."

"I believe hair in general has an irritating effect upon you, Simion Petrovitch," Mariana remarked. "I feel sure you can't bear to see it cut short like mine."

Valentina Mihailovna lifted her eyebrows slowly, then dropped her head, as if astonished at the freedom with which modern young girls entered into conversation. Kollomietzev smiled condescendingly.

"Of course," he said, "I can't help feeling sorry for beautiful curls such as yours, Mariana Vikentievna, falling under the merciless snip of a pair of scissors, but it doesn't arouse antipathy in me. In any case, your example might even … even … convert me!"

Kollomietzev could not think of a Russian word, and did not like using a French one, after what his hostess had said.

"Thank heaven," Valentina Mihailovna remarked, "Mariana does not wear glasses and has not yet discarded collars and cuffs; but, unfortunately, she studies natural history, and is even interested in the woman question. Isn't that so, Mariana?

This was evidently said to make Mariana feel uncomfortable, but Mariana, however, did not feel uncomfortable.

"Yes, auntie," she replied, " I read everything I can get hold of on the subject. I am trying to understand the woman question."

"There is youth for you!" Valentina Mihailovna exclaimed, turning to Kollomietzev. "Now you and I are not at all interested in that sort of thing, are we?

Kollomietzev smiled good-naturedly; he could not help entering into the playful mood of his amiable hostess.

"Mariana Vikentievna," he began, "is still full of the ideals … the romanticism of youth … which … in time—"

"Heaven, I was unjust to myself," Valentina Mihailovna interrupted him; "I am also interested in these questions. I am not quite an old lady yet."

"Of course. So am I in a way," Kollomietzev put in hastily. "Only I would forbid such things being talked about!"

"Forbid them being talked about?" Mariana asked in astonishment.

"Yes! I would say to the public, 'Interest yourselves in these things as much as you like, but talk about them… shhh… '" He layed his finger on his lips.

"I would, at any rate, forbid speaking through the press under any conditions!"

Valentina Mihailovna laughed.

"What? Would you have a commission appointed by the ministers for settling these questions?

"Why not? Don't you think we could do it better than these ignorant, hungry loafers who know nothing and imagine themselves to be men of genius? We could appoint Boris Andraevitch as president."

Valentina Mihailovna laughed louder still.

"You had better take care, Boris Andraevitch is sometimes such a Jacobin—"

"Jacko, jacko, jacko," the parrot screamed. Valentina Mihailovna waved her handkerchief at him. "Don't interrupt an intelligent conversation! Mariana, do teach him manners!"

Mariana turned to the cage and began stroking the parrot's neck with her finger; the parrot stretched towards her.

"Yes," Valentina Mihailovna continued, "Boris Andraevitch astonishes me, too, sometimes. There is a certain strain in him … a certain strain … of the tribune."

"C'est parce qu'il est orateur!" Kollomietzev exclaimed enthusiastically in French. "Your husband is a marvellous orator and is accustomed to success … ses propres paroles le grisent … and then his desire for popularity. By the way, he is rather annoyed just now, is he not? Il boude? Eh?"

Valentina Mihailovna looked at Mariana.

"I haven't noticed it," she said after a pause. "Yes," Kollomietzev continued pensively, "he was rather overlooked at Easter."

Valentina Mihailovna indicated Mariana with her eyes. Kollomietzev smiled and screwed up his eyes, conveying to her that he understood. "Mariana Vikentievna," he exclaimed suddenly, in an unnecessarily loud tone of voice, "do you intend teaching at the school again this year?"

Mariana turned round from the cage.

"Are you interested to know, Simion Petrovitch? "

"Certainly. I am very much interested."

"Would you forbid it?"

"I would forbid nihilists even so much as to think of schools. I would put all schools into the hands of the clergy, and with an eye on them I wouldn't mind running one myself!"

"Really! I haven't the slightest idea what I shall do this year. Last year things were not at all successful. Besides, how can you get a school together in the summer?

Mariana blushed deeply all the time she was speaking, as if it cost her some effort. She was still very self-conscious.

"Are you not sufficiently prepared?" Valentina Mihailovna asked sarcastically.

"Perhaps not."

"Heavens! " Kollomietzev exclaimed. "What do I hear? 0h ye gods! Is preparation necessary to teach peasants the alphabet?"

At this moment Kolia ran into the drawing room shouting "Mamma! mamma! Papa has come!" And after him, waddling on her stout little legs, appeared an old grey-haired lady in a cap and yellow shawl, and also announced that Boris had come.

This lady was Sipiagin's aunt, and was called Anna Zaharovna. Everyone in the drawing room rushed out into the hall, down the stairs, and on to the steps of the portico. A long avenue of chipped yews ran straight from these steps to the high road—a carriage and four was already rolling up the avenue straight towards them. Valentina Mihailovna, standing in front, waved her pocket handkerchief, Kolia shrieked with delight, the coachman adroitly pulled up the steaming horses, a footman came down headlong from the box and almost pulled the carriage door off its hinges in his effort to open it—and then, with a

condescending smile on his lips, in his eyes, over the whole of his face, Boris Andraevitch, with one graceful gesture of the shoulders, dropped his cloak and sprang to the ground. Valentina Mihailovna gracefully threw her arms round his neck and they kissed three times. Kolia stamped his little feet and pulled at his father's coat from behind, but Boris Andraevitch first kissed Anna Zaharovna, quickly threw off his uncomfortable, ugly Scotch cap, greeted Mariana and Kollomietzev, who had also come out (he gave Kollomietzev a hearty shake of the hand in the English fashion), and then turned to his little son, lifted him under the arms, and kissed him.

During this scene Nejdanov half guiltily scrambled out of the carriage and, without removing his cap, stood quietly near the front wheel, looking out from under his eyebrows. Valentina Mihailovna, when embracing her husband, had cast a penetrating look over his shoulder at this new figure. Sipiagin had informed her that he was bringing a tutor.

Everyone continued exchanging greetings and shaking hands with the newly-arrived host as they all moved up the broad stairs, lined on either side with the principal men and maid servants. They did not come forward to kiss the master's hand (an Asiatic custom they had abandoned long ago), but bowed respectfully. Sipiagin responded to their salutations with a slight movement of the nose and eyebrows, rather than an inclination of the head.

Nejdanov followed the stream up the wide stairs. As soon as they reached the hall, Sipiagin, who had been searching for Nejdanov with his eyes, introduced him to his wife, Anna Zaharovna, and Mariana, and said to Kolia, "This is your tutor. Mind you do as he tells you. Give him your hand." Kolia extended his hand timidly, stared at him fixedly, but finding nothing particularly interesting about his tutor, turned to his "papa" again. Nejdanov felt uncomfortable, just as he had done at the theatre. He wore an old shabby coat, and his face and hands were covered with dust from the journey. Valentina Mihailovna said something kindly to him, but he did not quite catch what it was and did not reply. He noticed that she was very bright, and clung to her husband affectionately. He did not like Kolia's befrizzled and pomaded head, and when his eye fell on Kollomietzev, thought" What a sleek individual." He paid no attention to the others. Sipiagin turned his head once or twice in a dignified manner, as if looking round at his worldly belongings, a pose that set off to perfection his long drooping whiskers and somewhat small round neck. Then he shouted to one of the servants in a loud resonant voice, not at all husky from the journey, "Ivan! Take this gentleman to

the green room and see to his luggage afterwards!" He then told Nejdanov that he could change and rest awhile, and that dinner would be served at five o'clock. Nejdanov bowed and followed Ivan to the "green" room, which was situated on the second floor.

The whole company went into the drawing room. The host was welcomed all over again. An old blind nurse appeared and made him a courtesy. Out of consideration for her years, Sipiagin gave her his hand to kiss. He then begged Kollomietzev to excuse him, and retired to his own room accompanied by his wife.

Chapter 7

The room into which the servant conducted Nejdanov was beautifully neat and spacious, with wide-open windows looking on to the garden. A gentle breeze stirred the white curtains, blowing them out high like sails and letting them fall again. Golden reflections glided lightly over the ceiling; the whole room was filled with the moist freshness of spring. Nejdanov dismissed the servant, unpacked his trunk, washed, and changed. The journey had thoroughly exhausted him. The constant presence of a stranger during the last two days, the many fruitless discussions, had completely upset his nerves. A certain bitterness, which was neither boredom nor anger, accumulated mysteriously in the depths of his being. He was annoyed with himself for his lack of courage, but his heart ached. He went up to the window and looked out into the garden. It was an old- fashioned garden, with rich dark soil, such as one rarely sees around Moscow, laid out on the slope of a hill into four separate parts. In front of the house there was a flower garden, with straight gravel paths, groups of acacias and lilac, and round flower beds. To the left, past the stable yard, as far down as the barn, there was an orchard, thickly planted with apples, pears, plums, currants, and raspberries. Beyond the flower garden, in front of the house, there was a large square walk, thickly enterlaced with lime trees. To the right, the view was shut out by an avenue of silver poplars; a glimpse of an orangery could be seen through a group of weeping willows. The whole garden was clothed in its first green leaves; the loud buzz of summer insects was not yet heard; the leaves rustled gently, chaffinches twittered everywhere; two doves sat cooing on a tree; the note of a solitary cuckoo was heard first in one place, then in another; the friendly cawing of rooks was carried from the distance beyond the mill pond, sounding like the creaking of innumerable cart wheels. Light clouds floated dreamily over this gentle stillness, spreading themselves out like the breasts of some huge,lazy birds.

Nejdanov gazed and listened, drinking in the cool air through half-parted lips.

His depression left him and a wonderful calmness entered his soul.

Meanwhile he was being discussed in the bedroom below. Sipiagin was telling his wife how he had met him, what Prince G. had said of him, and the gist of their talks on the journey.

"A clever chap!" he repeated, "and well educated, too. It's true he's a revolutionist, but what does it matter? These people are ambitious, at any rate. As for Kolia, he is too young to be spoiled by any of this nonsense."

Valentina Mihailovna listened to her husband affectionately; an amused smile played on her lips, as if he were telling her of some naughty amusing prank. It was pleasant to her to think that her seigneur a maitre, such a respectable man, of important position, could be as mischievous as a boy of twenty. Standing before the looking-glass in a snow-white shirt and blue silk braces, Sipiagin was brushing his hair in the English fashion with two brushes, while Valentina Mihailovna, her feet tucked under her, was sitting on a narrow Turkish couch, telling him various news about the house, the paper mill, which, alas, was not going well, as was to be expected; about the possibilities of changing the cook, about the church, of which the plaster had come off; about Mariana, Kollomietzev…

Between husband and wife there existed the fullest confidence and good understanding; they certainly lived in "love and harmony," as people used to say in olden days. When Sipiagin, after finishing his toilet, asked chivalrously for his wife's hand and she gave him both, and watched him with an affectionate pride as he kissed them in turn, the feeling expressed in their faces was good and true, although in her it shone out of a pair of eyes worthy of Raphael, and in him out of the ordinary eyes of a mere official.

On the stroke of five Nejdanov went down to dinner, which was announced by a Chinese gong, not by a bell. The whole company was already assembled in the dining room. Sipiagin welcomed him again from behind his high cravat, and showed him to a place between Anna Zaharovna and Kolia. Anna Zaharovna was an old maid, a sister of Sipiagin's father; she exhaled a smell of camphor, like a garment that had been put away for a long time, and had a nervous, dejected look. She had acted as Kolia's nurse or governess, and her wrinkled face expressed displeasure when Nejdanov sat down between her and her charge. Kolia looked sideways at his new neighbour; the intelligent boy soon saw that his tutor was shy and uncomfortable, that he did not raise his eyes, and

scarcely ate anything. This pleased Kolia, who had been afraid that his tutor would be cross and severe. Valentina Mihailovna also watched Nejdanov.

"He looks like a student," she thought to herself. "He's not accustomed to society, but has a very interesting face, and the colour of his hair is like that of the apostle whose hair the old Italian masters always painted red—and his hands are clean!" Indeed, everybody at the table stared at Nejdanov, but they had mercy on him, and left him in peace for the time being. He was conscious of this, and was pleased and angry about it at the same time.

Sipiagin and Kollomietzev carried on the conversation. They talked about the county council, the governor, the highway tax, the peasants buying out the land, about mutual Moscow and St. Petersburg acquaintances, Katkov's lyceum, which was just coming into fashion, about the difficulty of getting labour, penalties, and damage caused by cattle, even of Bismarck, the war of 1866, and Napoleon III., whom Kollomietzev called a hero. Kollomietzev gave vent to the most retrograde opinions, going so far as to propose, in jest it is true, a toast given by a certain friend of his on a names-day banquet, "I drink to the only principle I acknowledge, the whip and Roedeger!"

Valentina Mihailovna frowned, and remarked that it was de tres mauvais gout.

Sipiagin, on the contrary, expressed the most liberal views, refuted Kollomietzev's arguments politely, though with a certain amount of disdain, and even chaffed him a little.

"Your terror of emancipation, my dear Simion Petrovitch," he said, "puts me in mind of our much respected friend, Alexai Ivanovitch Tveritinov, and the petition he sent in, in the year 1860. He insisted on reading it in every drawing room in St. Petersburg. There was one rather good sentence in it about our liberated serf, who was to march over the face of the fatherland bearing a torch in his hand. You should have seen our dear Alexai Ivanovitch, blowing out his cheeks and blinking his little eyes, pronounce in his babyish voice, 'T-torch! t-torch! Will march with a t-torch!' Well, the emancipation is now an established fact, but where is the peasant with the torch?

"Tveritinov was only slightly wrong," Kollomietzev said solemnly. "Not the peasants will march with the torch, but others."

At the words, Nejdanov, who until then had scarcely noticed Mariana, who sat a little to one side, exchanged glances with her, and instantly felt

that this solemn girl and he were of the same convictions, of the same stamp. She had made no impression on him whatever when Sipiagin had introduced them; then why did he exchange glances with her in particular? He wondered if it was not disgraceful to sit and listen to such views without protesting and by reason of his silence letting others think that he shared them. Nejdanov looked at Mariana a second time, and her eyes seemed to say, "Wait a while … the time is not ripe. It isn't worth it … later on … there is plenty of time in store."

He was happy to think that she understood him, and began following the conversation again. Valentina Mihailovna supported her husband, and was, if anything, even more radical in her expressions than he. She could not understand, "simply could not un-der-stand, how an educated young man could hold such antiquated views."

"However," she added, "I am convinced that you only say these things for the sake of argument. And you, Alexai Dmitritch," she added to Nejdanov, with a smile (he wondered how she had learned his Christian name and his father's name), "I know, do not share Simion Petrovitch's fears; my husband told me about your talks on the journey."

Nejdanov blushed, bent over his plate, and mumbled something; he did not feel shy, but was simply unaccustomed to conversing with such brilliant personages. Madame Sipiagin continued smiling to him; her husband nodded his head patronisingly. Kollomietzev stuck his monocle between his eyebrow and nose and stared at the student who dared not to share his "fears." But it was difficult to embarrass Nejdanov in this way; on the contrary, he instantly sat up straight, and in his turn fixed his gaze on the fashionable official. Just as instinctively as he had felt Mariana to be a comrade, so he felt Kollomietzev to be an enemy! Kollomietzev felt it too; he removed his monocle, turned away, and tried to laugh carelessly—but it did not come off somehow. Only Anna Zaharovna, who secretly worshipped him, was on his side, and became even angrier than before with the unwelcome neighbour separating her from Kolia.

Soon after this dinner came to an end. The company went out on the terrace to drink coffee. Sipiagin and Kollomietzev lit up cigars. Sipiagin offered Nejdanov a regalia, but the latter refused.

"Why, of course!" Sipiagin exclaimed; "I've forgotten that you only smoke your own particular cigarettes!

"A curious taste!" Kollomietzev muttered between his teeth.

Nejdanov very nearly burst out, "I know the difference between a regalia and a cigarette quite well, but I don't want to be under an obligation to anyone!" but he contained himself and held his peace. He put down this second piece of insolence to his enemy's account.

"Mariana!" Madame Sipiagin suddenly called, "don't be on ceremony with our new friend … smoke your cigarette if you like. All the more so, as I hear," she added, turning to Nejdanov, "that among you all young ladies smoke."

"Yes," Nejdanov remarked dryly. This was the first remark he had made to Madame Sipiagina.

"I don't smoke," she continued, screwing up her velvety eyes caressingly. "I suppose I am behind the times."

Mariana slowly and carefully took out a cigarette, a box of matches, and began to smoke, as if on purpose to spite her aunt. Nejdanov took a light from Mariana and also began smoking.

It was a beautiful evening. Kolia and Anna Zaharovna went into the garden; the others remained for some time longer on the terrace enjoying the fresh air. The conversation was very lively. Kollomietzev condemned modern literature, and on this subject, too, Sipiagin showed himself a liberal. He insisted on the utter freedom and independence of literature, pointed out its uses, instanced Chateaubriand, whom the Emperor Alexander Pavlitch had invested with the order of St. Andrew! Nejdanov did not take part in the discussion; Madame Sipiagina watched him with an expression of approval and surprise at his modesty.

They all went in to drink tea in the drawing room.

"Alexai Dmitritch," Sipiagin said to Nejdanov, "we are addicted to the bad habit of playing cards in the evening, and even play a forbidden game, stukushka… . I won't ask you to join us, but perhaps Mariana will be good enough to play you something on the piano. You like music, I hope." And without waiting for an answer Sipiagin took up a pack of cards. Mariana sat down at the piano and played, rather indifferently, several of Mendelssohn's "Songs Without Words." Charmant! Charmant! quel touché! Kollomietzev called out from the other end of the room, but the exclamation was only due to politeness, and Nejdanov, in spite of Sipiagin's remark, showed no passion for music.

Meanwhile Sipiagin, his wife, Kollomietzev, and Anna Zaharovna sat down to cards. Kolia came to say goodnight, and, receiving his parents' blessing and a large glass of milk instead of tea, went off to bed. His

father called after him to inform him that tomorrow he was to begin his lessons with Alexai Dmitritch. A little later, seeing Nejdanov wandering aimlessly about the room and turning over the photographic albums, apparently without any interest, Sipiagin begged him not to be on ceremony and retire if he wished, as he was probably tired after the journey, and to remember that the ruling principle of their house was liberty.

Nejdanov took advantage of this and bowing to all present went out. In the doorway he knocked against Mariana, and, looking into her eyes, was convinced a second time that they would be comrades, although she showed no sign of pleasure at seeing him, but, on the contrary, frowned heavily.

When he went in, his room was filled with a sweet freshness; the windows had stood wide open all day. In the garden, opposite his window, a nightingale was trilling out its sweet song; the evening sky became covered with the warm glow of the rising moon behind the rounded tops of the lime trees. Nejdanov lit a candle; a grey moth fluttered in from the dark garden straight to the flame; she circled round it, whilst a gentle breeze from without blew on them both, disturbing the yellow-bluish flame of the candle.

"How strange!" Nejdanov thought, lying in bed; "they seem good, liberal-minded people, even humane … but I feel so troubled in my heart. This chamberlain . Kollomietzev… . However, morning is wiser than evening … It's no good being sentimental."

At this moment the watchman knocked loudly with his stick and called out, "I say there—"

"Take care," answered another doleful voice. "Fugh! Heavens! It's like being in prison!" Nejdanov exclaimed.

Chapter 8

NEJDANOV awoke early and, without waiting for a servant, dressed and went out into the garden. It was very large and beautiful this garden, and well kept. Hired labourers were scraping the paths with their spades, through the bright green shrubs a glimpse of kerchiefs could be seen on the heads of the peasant girls armed with rakes. Nejdanov wandered down to the pond; the early morning mist had already lifted, only a few curves in its banks still remained in obscurity. The sun, not yet far above the horizon, threw a rosy light over the steely silkiness of its broad surface. Five carpenters were busy about the raft, a newly-painted boat was lightly rocking from side to side, creating a gentle ripple over the water. The men rarely spoke, and then in somewhat preoccupied tones. Everything was submerged in the morning stillness, and everyone was occupied with the morning work; the whole gave one a feeling of order and regularity of everyday life. Suddenly, at the other end of the avenue, Nejdanov got a vision of the very incarnation of order and regularity— Sipiagin himself.

He wore a brown coat, something like a dressing gown, and a checkered cap; he was leaning on an English bamboo cane, and his newly-shaven face shone with satisfaction; he was on the round of inspecting his estate. Sipiagin greeted Nejdanov kindly.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "I see you are one of the early birds!" (He evidently wanted to express his approval by this old saying, which was a little out of place, of the fact that Nejdanov, like himself, did not like lying in bed long.) "At eight o'clock we all take tea in the dining room, and we usually breakfast at twelve. I should like you to give Kolia his first lesson in Russian grammar at ten o'clock, and a lesson in history at two. I don't want him to have any lessons tomorrow, as it will he his name-day, hut I would like you to begin today."

Nejdanov bowed his head, and Sipiagin took leave of him in the French fashion, quickly lifting his hand several times to his lips and nose, and walked away, whistling and waving his cane energetically, not at all

like an important official and state dignitary, but like a jolly Russian country gentleman.

Until eight o'clock Nejdanov stayed in the garden, enjoying the shadows cast by the old trees, the fresh air, the singing of the birds, until the sound of a gong called him to the house. On his entrance he found the whole company already assembled in the dining room. Valentina Mihailovna greeted him in a friendly manner; she seemed to him marvellously beautiful in her morning gown. Mariana looked stern and serious as usual.

Exactly at ten o'clock Nejdanov gave Kolia his first lesson before Valentina Mihailovna, who had asked him if she might he present, and sat very quietly the whole time. Kolia proved an intelligent boy; after the inevitable moments of incertitude and discomfort, the lesson went off very well, and Valentina Mihailovna was evidently satisfied with Nejdanov, and spoke to him several times kindly. He tried to hold aloof a little—but not too much so. Valentina Mihailovna was also present at the second lesson, this time on Russian history. She announced, with a smile, that in this subject she needed instruction almost as much as Kolia. She conducted herself just as quietly as she had done at the first lesson.

Between two and five o'clock Nejdanov stayed in his own room writing letters to his St. Petersburg friends. He was neither bored nor in despair; his overstrained nerves had calmed down somewhat. However, they were set on edge again at dinner, although Kollomietzev was not present, and the kind attention of host and hostess remained unchanged; but it was this very attention that made Nejdanov angry. To make matters worse, the old maiden lady, Anna Zaharovna, was obviously antagonistic, Mariana continued serious, and Kolia rather unceremoniously kicked him under the table. Sipiagin also seemed out of sorts. He was extremely dissatisfied with the manager of his paper mill, a German, to whom he paid a large salary. Sipiagin began by abusing Germans in general, then announced that he was somewhat of a Slavophil, though not a fanatic, and mentioned a certain young Russian, by the name of Solomin, who, it was said, had successfully established another mill belonging to a neighbouring merchant; he was very anxious to meet this Solomin.

Kollomietzev came in the evening; his own estate was only about ten miles away from "Arjanov," the name of Sipiagin's village. There also came a certain justice of the peace, a squire, of the kind so admirably described in the two famous lines of Lermontov—

Behind a cravat, frock coat to the heels Moustache, squeaky voice—and heavy glance.

Another guest arrived, with a dejected look, without a tooth in his head, but very accurately dressed. After him came the local doctor, a very bad doctor, who was fond of coming out with learned expressions. He assured everyone, for instance, that he liked Kukolnik better than Pushkin because there was a great deal of "protoplasm" about him. They all sat down to play cards. Nejdanov retired to his own room, and read and wrote until midnight.

The following day, the 9th of May, was Kolia's patron-saint's day.

Although the church was not a quarter of a mile off, the whole household drove to mass in three open carriages with footmen at the back. Everything was very festive and gorgeous. Sipiagin decorated himself with his order, Valentina Mihailovna was dressed in a beautiful pale lavender-coloured Parisian gown, and during the service read her prayers out of a tiny little prayer hook bound in red velvet. This little book was a matter of great concern among several old peasants, one of whom, unable to contain himself any longer, asked of his neighbour: "What is she doing? Lord have mercy on us! Is she casting a spell? " The sweet scent of the flowers, which filled the whole church, mingled with the smell of the peasant's coats, tarred boots and shoes, the whole being drowned by the delicious, overpowering scent of incense.

In the choir the clerks and sacristans tried their very hardest to sing well, and with the help of the men from the factory attempted something like a concert! There was a moment when an almost painful sensation came over the congregation. The tenor's voice (it belonged to one of the men from the factory, who was in the last stages of consumption) rose high above the rest, and without the slightest restraint trilled out long chromatic flat minor notes; they were terrible these notes! but to stop them would have meant the whole concert going to pieces… . However, the thing went off without any mishap. Father Kiprian, a priest of the most patriarchal appearance, dressed in the full vestments of the church, delivered his sermon out of a copy-book. Unfortunately, the conscientious father had considered it necessary to introduce the names of several very wise Assyrian kings, which caused him some trouble in pronunciation. He succeeded in showing a certain amount of learning, but perspired very much in the effort!

Nejdanov, who for a long time had not been inside a church, stood in a corner amidst the peasant women, who kept casting sidelong glances at

him in between crossing themselves, bowing piously to the ground, and wiping their babies' noses. But the peasant girls in their new coats and beaded head-dresses, and the boys in their embroidered shirts, with girdles round their waists, stared intently at the new worshipper, turning their faces straight towards him… Nejdanov, too, looked at them, and many things rose up in his mind.

After mass, which lasted a very long time—the service of St. Nikolai the Miraculous is well known to he one of the longest in the Orthodox Church—all the clergy, at Sipiagin's invitation, returned to his house, and, after going through several additional ceremonies, such as sprinkling the room with holy water, they all sat down to an abundant breakfast, interspersed with the usual congratulations and rather wearisome talk. The host and hostess, who never took breakfast at such an early hour, broke the rule on this occasion. Sipiagin even went so far as to relate an anecdote, quite proper, of course, but nevertheless amusing, in spite of his dignity and red ribbon, and caused Father Kiprian to be filled with gratitude and amazement. To show that he, too, could tell something worth hearing on occasion, the good father related a conversation he had had with the bishop, when the latter, on a tour round his diocese, had invited all the clergy of the district to come and see him at the monastery in the town. " He is very severe with us," Father Kiprian assured everyone. "First he questioned us about our parish, about our arrangements, and then he began to examine us… . He turned to me also: 'What is your church's dedication day?' 'The Transfiguration of our Lord,' I replied. 'Do you know the hymn for that day? " I think so.' 'Sing it.' 'Thou wert transfigured on the mountain, Christ our Lord,' I began. 'Stop! Do you know the meaning of the Transfiguration?' 'To be quite brief,' I replied, 'our Lord wished to show himself to His disciples in all His glory.' 'Very well,' he said, 'here is a little image in memory of me.' I fell at his feet. ' I thank you, your Holiness… .' I did not go away from him emptyhanded."

"I have the honour of knowing his Holiness personally," Sipiagin said solemnly. "A most worthy pastor!"

"Most worthy!" Father Kiprian agreed; "only he puts too much faith in the ecclesiastical superintendents! "

Valentina Mihailovna referred to the peasant school, and spoke of Mariana as the future schoolmistress; the deacon (who had been appointed supervisor of the school), a man of strong athletic build, with long waving hair, bearing a faint resemblance to the well-groomed tail of an

Orlov race courser, quite forgetting his vocal powers, gave forth such a volume of sound as to confuse himself and frighten everybody else. Soon after this the clergy took their leave.

Kolia, in his new coat decorated with golden buttons, was the hero of the day. He was given presents, he was congratulated, his hands were kissed at the front door and at the back door by servants, workmen from the factory, old women and young girls and peasants; the latter, in memory of the days of serfdom, hung around the tables in front of the house, spread out with pies and small bottles of vodka. The happy boy was shy and pleased and proud, all at the same time; he caressed his parents and ran out of the room. At dinner Sipiagin ordered champagne, and before drinking his son's health made a speech. He spoke of the significance of "serving the land," and indicated the road he wished his Nikolai to follow (he did not use the diminutive of the boy's name), of the duty he owed, first to his family; secondly to his class, to society; thirdly to the people—" Yes, my dear ladies and gentlemen, to the people; and fourthly, to the government!" By degrees Sipiagin became quite eloquent, with his hand under the tail of his coat in imitation of Robert Peel. He pronounced the word "science " with emotion, and finished his speech by the Latin exclamation, laboremus! which he instantly translated into Russian. Kolia, with a glass in his hand, went over to thank his father and to be kissed by the others.

Nejdanov exchanged glances with Mariana again…

They no doubt felt the same, but they did not speak to each other.

However, Nejdanov was more amused than annoyed with the whole proceeding, and the amiable hostess, Valentina Mihailovna, seemed to him to be an intelligent woman, who was aware that she was playing a part, but pleased to think that there was someone else intelligent enough to understand her. Nejdanov probably had no suspicion of the degree in which he was flattered by her attitude towards him.

On the following day lessons were renewed, and life fell back in its ordinary rut.

A week flew by in this way. Nejdanov's thoughts and experiences during that time may be best gathered from an extract of a letter he wrote to a certain Silin, an old school chum and his best friend. Silin did not live in St. Petersburg, but in a distant provincial town, with an old relative on whom he was entirely dependent. His position was such that he could hardly dream of ever getting away from there. He was a man of very poor health, timid, of limited capacity, but of an extraordinarily pure

nature. He did not interest himself in politics, but read anything that came in his way, played on the flute as a resource against boredom, and was afraid of young ladies. Silin was passionately fond of Nejdanov—he had an affectionate heart in general. Nejdanov did not express himself to anyone as freely as he did to Vladimir Silin; when writing to him he felt as if he were communicating to some dear and intimate soul, dwelling in another world, or to his own conscience. Nejdanov could not for a moment conceive of the idea of living together again with Silin, as comrades in the same town. He would probably have lost interest in him, as there was little in common between them, but he wrote him long letters gladly with the fullest confidence. With others, on paper at any rate, he was not himself, but this never happened when writing to Silin. The latter was not a master in the art of writing, and responded only in short clumsy sentences, but Nejdanov had no need of lengthy replies; he knew quite well that his friend swallowed every word of his, as the dust in the road swallows each drop of rain, that he would keep his secrets sacredly, and that in his hopeless solitude he had no other interests but his, Nejdanov's, interests. He had never told anyone of his relation with Silin, a relation that was very dear to him.

"Well, my dear friend, my pure-hearted Vladimir!" Thus he wrote to him; he always called him pure-hearted, and not without good cause. "Congratulate me; I have fallen upon green pasture, and can rest awhile and gather strength. I am living in the house of a rich statesman, Sipiagin, as tutor to his little son; I eat well (have never eaten so well in my life!), sleep well, and wander about the beautiful country—but, above all, I have for a time crept out from under the wing of my St. Petersburg friends. At first it was horribly boring, but I feel a bit better now. I shall soon have to go into harness again, that is, put up with the consequences of what I have undertaken (the reason I was allowed to come here). For a time, at any rate, I can enjoy the delights of a purely animal existence, expand in the waist, and write verses if the mood seizes me. I will give you my observations another time. The estate seems to me well managed on the whole, with the exception, perhaps, of the factory, which is not quite right; some of the peasants are unapproachable, and the hired servants have servile faces—but we can talk about these things later on. My host and hostess are courteous, liberal-minded people; the master is for ever condescending, and bursts out from time to time in torrents of eloquence, a most highly cultured person! His lady, a picturesque beauty, who has all her wits about her, keeps such a close watch on one, and is so soft! I should think she has

not a bone in her body! I am rather afraid of her, you know what sort of a ladies' man I make! There are neighbours—but uninteresting ones; then there is an old lady in the house who makes me feel uncomfortable… . Above all, I am interested in a certain young lady, but whether she is a relative or simply a companion here the Lord only knows! I have scarcely exchanged a couple of words with her, but I feel that we are birds of a feather… "

Here followed a description of Mariana's personal appearance and of all her habits; then he continued:

"That she is unhappy, proud, ambitious, reserved, but above all unhappy, I have not the smallest doubt. But why she is unhappy, I have as yet failed to discover. That she has an upright nature is quite evident, but whether she is good-natured or not remains to be seen. Are there really any good-natured women other than stupid ones? Is goodness essential? However, I know little about women. The lady of the house does not like her, and I believe it is mutual on either side… . But which of them is in the right is difficult to say. I think that the mistress is probably in the wrong … because she is so awfully polite to her; the other's brows twitch nervously when she is speaking to her patroness. She is a most highly-strong individual, like myself, and is just as easily upset as I am, although perhaps not in the same way.

"When all this can be disentangled, I will write to you again.

"She hardly ever speaks to me, as I have already told you, but in the few words she has addressed to me (always rather sudden and unexpected) there was a ring of rough sincerity which I liked. By the way, how long is that relative of yours going to bore you to death? When is he going to die?

"Have you read the article in the "European Messenger" about the latest impostors in the province of Orenburg? It happened in 1834, my dear! I don't like the journal, and the writer of the article is a conservative, but the thing is interesting and calculated to give one ideas…

Chapter 9

MAY had reached its second half; the first hot summer days had already set in.

After his history lesson one day, Nejdanov wandered out into the garden, and from thence into a birch wood adjoining it on one side. Certain parts of this wood had been cleared by merchants about fifteen years ago, but these clearings were already densely overgrown by young birches, whose soft silver trunks encircled by grey rings rose as straight as pillars, and whose bright green leaves sparkled as if they had just been washed and polished. The grass shot up in sharp tongues through the even layers of last years' fallen leaves. Little narrow paths ran here and there, from which yellow-beaked blackbirds rose with startled cries, flying close to the earth into the wood as hard as they could go.

After wandering about for half an hour, Nejdanov sat down on the stump of a tree, surrounded by old greyish splinters, lying in heaps, exactly as they had fallen when cut down by the axe. Many a time had these splinters been covered by the winter's snow and been thawed by the spring sun, but nobody had touched them.

Nejdanov leaned against a solid wall of young birches casting a heavy though mild shade. He was not thinking of anything in particular, but gave himself up to those peculiar sensations of spring which in the heart of young and old alike are always mixed with a certain degree of sadness—the keen sadness of awaiting in the young and of settled regret in the old.

Nejdanov was suddenly awakened by approaching footsteps.

It did not sound like the footsteps of one person, nor like a peasant in heavy boots, or a barefooted peasant woman; it seemed as if two people were advancing at a slow, measured pace. The slight rustling of a woman's dress was heard.

Suddenly a deep man's voice was heard to say:

Is this your last word? Never?

"Never!" a familiar woman's voice repeated, and a moment later from a bend in the path, hidden from view by a young tree, Mariana appeared, accompanied by a swarthy man with black eyes, an individual whom Nejdanov had never seen before.

They both stood still as if rooted to the spot on catching sight of him, and he was so taken aback that he did not rise from the stump he was sitting on. Mariana blushed to the roots of her hair, but instantly gave a contemptuous smile. It was difficult to say whether the smile was meant for herself, for having blushed, or for Nejdanov. Her companion scowled—a sinister gleam was seen in the yellowish whites of his troubled eyes. He exchanged glances with Mariana, and without saying a word they turned their backs on Nejdanov and walked away as slowly as they had come, while Nejdanov followed them with a look of amazement.

Half an hour later he returned home to his room, and when, at the sound of the gong, he appeared in the drawing room, the dark-eyed stranger whom he had seen in the wood was already there. Sipiagin introduced Nejdanov to him as his beaufrere'a, Valentina Mihailovna's brother—Sergai Mihailovitch Markelov.

"I hope you will get to know each other and be friends, gentlemen," Sipiagin exclaimed with the amiable, stately, though absent-minded smile characteristic of him.

Markelov bowed silently; Nejdanov responded in a similar way, and Sipiagin, throwing back his head slightly and shrugging his shoulders, walked away, as much as to say, "I've brought you together, but whether you become friends or not is a matter of equal indifference to me!

Valentina Mihailovna came up to the silent pair, standing motionless, and introduced them to each other over again; she then turned to her brother with that peculiarly bright, caressing expression which she seemed able to summon at will into her wonderful eyes.

"Why, my dear Serge, you've quite forgotten us! You did not even come on Kolia's name-day. Are you so very busy? My brother is making some sort of new arrangement with his peasants," she remarked, turning to Nejdanov. "So very original—three parts of everything for them and one for himself; even then he thinks that he gets more than his share."

"My sister is fond of joking," Markelov said to Nejdanov in his turn, "but I am prepared to agree with her; for one man to take a quarter of what belongs to a hundred, is certainly too much."

"Do you think that I am fond of joking, Alexai Dmitritch?" Madame Sipiagina asked with that same caressing softness in her voice and in her eyes.

Nejdanov was at a loss for a reply, but just then Kollomietzev was announced. The hostess went to meet him, and a few moments later a servant appeared and announced in a sing-song voice that dinner was ready.

At dinner Nejdanov could not keep his eyes off Mariana and Markelov. They sat side by side, both with downcast eyes, compressed lips, and an expression of gloomy severity on their angry faces. Nejdanov wondered how Markelov could possibly be Madame Sipiagina's brother; they were so little like each other. There was only one point of resemblance between them, their dark complexions; but the even colour of Valentina Mihailovna's face, arms, and shoulders constituted one of her charms, while in her brother it reached to that shade of swarthiness which polite people call "bronze," but which to the Russian eye suggests a brown leather boot-leg.

Markelov had curly hair, a somewhat hooked nose, thick lips, sunken cheeks, a narrow chest, and sinewy hands. He was dry and sinewy all over, and spoke in a curt, harsh, metallic voice. The sleepy look in his eyes, the gloomy expression, denoted a bilious temperament! He ate very little, amused himself by making bread pills, and every now and again would fix his eyes on Kollomietzev. The latter had just returned from town, where he had been to see the governor upon a rather unpleasant matter for himself, upon which he kept a tacit silence, but was very voluble about everything else. Sipiagin sat on him somewhat when he went a little too far, but laughed a good deal at his anecdotes and bon mots, although he thought qu'il est un affreux reactionnaire. Kollomietzev declared, among other things, how he went into raptures at what the peasants, oui, oui! les simples mougiks! call lawyers. "Liars! Liars!" he shouted with delight. "Ce peupie russe est delicieux!" He then went on to say how once, when going through a village school, he asked one of the children what a babugnia was, and nobody could tell him, not even the teacher himself. He then asked what a pithecus was, and no one knew even that, although he had quoted the poet Himnitz, 'The weakwitted pithecus that mocks the other beasts.' Such is the deplorable condition of our peasant schools!

"But," Valentina Mihailovna remarked, "I don't know myself what are these animals!"

"Madame!" Kollomietzev exclaimed, "there is no necessity for you to know!"

"Then why should the peasants know?"

"Because it is better for them to know about these animals than about Proudhon or Adam Smith!"

Here Sipiagin again intervened, saying that Adam Smith was one of the leading lights in human thought, and that it would be well to imbibe his principles (he poured himself out a glass of wine) with the (he lifted the glass to his nose and sniffed at it) mother's milk! He swallowed the wine. Kollomietzev also drank a glass and praised it highly.

Markelov payed no special attention to Kollomietzev 's talk, but glanced interrogatively at Nejdanov once or twice; he flicked one of his little bread pills, which just missed the nose of the eloquent guest.

Sipiagin left his brother-in-law in peace; neither did Valentina Mihailovna speak to him; it was evident that both husband and wife considered Markelov an eccentric sort of person whom it was better not to provoke.

After dinner Markelov went into the billiard room to smoke a pipe, and Nejdanov withdrew into his own room.

In the corridor he ran against Mariana. He wanted to slip past her, when she stopped him with a quick movement of the hand.

"Mr. Nejdanov," she said in a somewhat unsteady tone of voice, "it ought to be all the same to me what you think of me, but still I find it… I find it… " (she could not think of a fitting word) "I find it necessary to tell you that when you met me in the wood today with Mr. Markelov … you must no doubt have thought, when you saw us both confused, that we had come there by appointment."

"It did seem a little strange to me—" Nejdanov began. "Mr. Markelov," Mariana interrupted him, "proposed to me … and I refused him. That is all I wanted to say to you. Goodnight. Think what you like of me."

She turned away and walked quickly down the corridor.

Nejdanov entered his own room and sat down by the window musing. "What a strange girl—why this wild issue, this uninvited explanation? Is it a desire to be original, or simply affectation—or pride? Pride, no doubt. She can't endure the idea… the faintest suspicion, that anyone should have a wrong opinion of her. What a strange girl!"

Thus Nejdanov pondered, while he was being discussed on the terrace below; every word could be heard distinctly.

I have a feeling," Kollomietzev declared, "a feeling, that he's a revolutionist. When I served on a special commission at the governor-general's of Moscow avec Ladisias, I learned to scent these gentlemen as well as nonconformists. I believe in instinct above everything." Here Kollomietzev related how he had once caught an old sectarian by the heel somewhere near Moscow, on whom he had looked in, accompanied by the police, and who nearly jumped out of his cottage window. "He was sitting quite quietly on his bench until that moment, the blackguard!"

Kollomietzev forgot to add that this old man, when put into prison, refused to take any food and starved himself to death.

"And your new tutor," Kollomietzev went on zealously, "is a revolutionist, without a shadow of a doubt! Have you noticed that he is never the first to bow to anyone?"

"Why should he?" Madame Sipiagina asked; "on the contrary, that is what I like about him."

"I am a guest in the house in which he serves," Kollomietzev exclaimed, "yes, serves for money, comme un salarie… . Consequently I am his superior… . He ought to bow to me first."

"My dear Kollomietzev, you are very particular," Sipiagin put in, laying special stress on the word dear. "I thought, if you'll forgive my saying so, that we had outgrown all that. I pay for his services, his work, but he remains a free man."

"He does not feel the bridle, le frein! All these revolutionists are like that. I tell you I can smell them from afar! Only Ladisias can compare with me in this respect. If this tutor were to fall into my hands wouldn't I give it to him! I would make him sing a very different tune! How he would begin touching his cap to me—it would be a pleasure to see him!"

"Rubbish, you swaggering little braggart!" Nejdanov almost shouted from above, but at this moment the door opened and, to his great astonishment, Markelov entered the room.

Chapter 10

NEJDANOV rose to meet him, and Markelov, coming straight up to him, without any form of greeting, asked him if he was Alexai Dmitritch, a student of the St. Petersburg University.

"Yes," Nejdanov replied.

Markelov took an unsealed letter out of a side pocket.

"In that case, please read this. It is from Vassily Nikolaevitch," he added, lowering his voice significantly.

Nejdanov unfolded and read the letter. It was a semi-official circular in which Sergai Markelov was introduced as one of "us," and absolutely trustworthy; then followed some advice about the urgent necessity of united action in the propaganda of their well-known principles. The circular was addressed to Nejdanov, as being a person worthy of confidence.

Nejdanov extended his hand to Markelov, offered him a chair, and sat down himself.

Markelov, without saying a word, began lighting a cigarette; Nejdanov followed his example.

"Have you managed to come in contact with the peasants here?" Markelov asked at last.

"No, I haven't had time as yet."

"How long have you been here?"

"About a fortnight."

"Have you much to do?"

"Not very much."

Markelov gave a severe cough.

"H'm! The people here are stupid enough. A most ignorant lot. They must be enlightened. They're wretchedly poor, but one can't make them understand the cause of their poverty."

"Your brother-in-law's old serfs, as far as one can judge, do not seem to be poor," Nejdanov remarked.

"My brother-in-law knows what he is about; he is a perfect master at humbugging people. His peasants are certainly not so badly off; but he has a factory; that is where we must turn our attention. The slightest dig there will make the ants move. Have you any books with you?"

"Yes, a few."

"I will get you some more. How is it you have so few?"

Nejdanov made no reply. Markelov also ceased, and began sending out puffs of smoke through his nostrils.

"What a pig this Kollomietzev is!" he exclaimed suddenly. "At dinner I could scarcely keep from rushing at him and smashing his impudent face as a warning to others. But no, there are more important things to be done just now. There is no time to waste getting angry with fools for saying stupid things. The time has now come to prevent them doing stupid things."

Nejdanov nodded his head and Markelov went on smoking. "Among the servants here there is only one who is any good," he began again. "Not your man, Ivan, he has no more sense than a fish, but another one, Kirill, the butler." (Kirill was known to be a confirmed drunkard.) "He is a drunken debauchee, but we can't be too particular. What do you think of my sister?" he asked, suddenly fixing his yellowish eyes on Nejdanov. "She is even more artful than my brother-in-law. What do you think of her?"

"I think that she is a very kind and pleasant lady… besides, she is very beautiful."

"H'm! With what subtlety you St. Petersburg gentlemen express yourselves! I can only marvel at it. Well, and what about—" he began, but his face darkened suddenly, and he did not finish the sentence. "I see that we must have a good talk," he went on. "It is quite impossible here. Who knows! They may be listening at the door. I have a suggestion. Today is Saturday; you won't be giving lessons to my nephew tomorrow, will you?"

"I have a rehearsal with him at three o'clock."

"A rehearsal! It sounds like the stage. My sister, no doubt, invented the word. Well, no matter. Would you like to come home with me now? My village is about ten miles off. I have some excellent horses who will get

us there in a twinkling. You could stay the night and the morning, and I could bring you back by three o'clock tomorrow. Will you come?"

"With pleasure," Nejdanov replied. Ever since Markelov's appearance he had been in a state of great excitement and embarrassment. This sudden intimacy made him feel ill at ease, but he was nevertheless drawn to him. He felt certain that the man before him was of a sufficiently blunt nature, but for all that honest and full of strength. Moreover, the strange meeting in the wood, Mariana's unexpected explanation…

"Very well!" Markelov exclaimed. "You can get ready while I order the carriage to be brought out. By the way, I hope you won't have to ask permission of our host and hostess."

"I must tell them. I don't think it would be wise to go away without doing so."

"I'll tell them," Markelov said. "They are engrossed in their cards just now and will not notice your absence. My brother-in- law aims only at governmental folk, and the only thing he can do well is to play at cards. However, it is said that many succeed in getting what they want through such means. You'll get ready, won't you? I'll make all arrangements immediately."

Markelov withdrew, and an hour later Nejdanov sat by his side on the broad leather-cushioned seat of his comfortable old carriage. The little coachman on the box kept on whistling in wonderfully pleasant bird-like notes; three piebald horses, with plaited manes and tails, flew like the wind over the smooth even road; and already enveloped in the first shadows of the night (it was exactly ten o'clock when they started), trees, bushes, fields, meadows, and ditches, some in the foreground, others in the background, sailed swiftly towards them.

Markelov's tiny little village, Borsionkov, consisting of about two hundred acres in all, and bringing him in an income of seven hundred roubles a year, was situated about three miles away from the provincial town, seven miles off from Sipiagin's village. To get to Borsionkov from Sipiagin's, one had to go through the town. Our new friends had scarcely time to exchange a hundred words when glimpses of the mean little dwellings of shopkeepers on the outskirts of the town flashed past them, little dwellings with shabby wooden roofs, from which faint patches of light could be seen through crooked little windows; the wheels soon rattled over the town bridge, paved with cobble stones; the carriage gave a jerk, rocked from side to side, and swaying with every jolt, rolled past the stupid two-storied stone houses, with imposing frontals, inhabited

by merchants, past the church, ornamented with pillars, past the shops… . It was Saturday night and the streets were already deserted— only the taverns were still filled with people. Hoarse drunken voices issued from them, singing, accompanied by the hideous sounds of a concertina. Every now and again a door opened suddenly, letting forth the red reflection of a rush-light and a filthy, overpowering smell of alcohol. Almost before every tavern door stood little peasant carts, harnessed with shaggy, big-bellied, miserable-looking hacks, whose heads were bowed submissively as if asleep; a tattered, unbelted peasant in a big winter cap, hanging like a sack at the back of his head, came out of a tavern door, and leaning his breast against the shafts, stood there helplessly fumbling at something with his hands; or a meagre-looking factory worker, his cap awry, his shirt unfastened, barefooted, his boots having been left inside, would take a few uncertain steps, stop still, scratch his back, groan suddenly, and turn in again…

"Drink will be the ruin of the Russian!" Markelov remarked gloomily.

"It's from grief, Sergai Mihailovitch," the coachman said without turning round. He ceased whistling on passing each tavern and seemed to sink into his own thoughts.

"Go on! Go on!" Markelov shouted angrily, vigorously tugging at his own coat collar. They drove through the wide market square reeking with the smell of rush mats and cabbages, past the governor's house with coloured sentry boxes standing at the gate, past a private house with turrets, past the boulevard newly planted with trees that were already dying, past the hotel court- yard, filled with the barking of dogs and the clanging of chains, and so on through the town gates, where they overtook a long, long line of waggons, whose drivers had taken advantage of the evening coolness, then out into the open country, where they rolled along more swiftly and evenly over the broad road, planted on either side with willows.

We must now say a few words about Markelov. He was six years older than his sister, Madame Sipiagina, and had been educated at an artillery school, which he left as an ensign, but sent in his resignation when he had reached the rank of lieutenant, owing to a certain unpleasantness that passed between him and his commanding officer, a German. Ever since then he always detested Germans, especially Russian Germans. He quarrelled with his father on account of his resignation, and never saw him again until just before his death, after which he inherited the little property and settled on it. In St. Petersburg he often came in contact with

various brilliant people of advanced views, whom he simply worshipped, and who finally brought him around to their way of thinking. Markelov had read little, mostly books relating to the thing that chiefly interested him, and was especially attached to Herzen. He retained his military habits, and lived like a Spartan and a monk. A few years ago he fell passionately in love with a girl who threw him over in a most unceremonious manner and married an adjutant, also a German. He consequently hated adjutants too. He tried to write a series of special articles on the shortcomings of our artillery, but had not the remotest idea of exposition and never finished a single article; he continued, however, covering large sheets of grey paper with his large, awkward, childish handwriting. Markelov was a man obstinate and fearless to desperation, never forgiving or forgetting, with a constant sense of injury done to himself and to all the oppressed, and prepared for anything. His limited mind was for ever knocking against one point; what was beyond his comprehension did not exist, but he loathed and despised all deceit and falsehood. With the upper classes, with the "reactionaries" as he called them, he was severe and even rude, but with the people he was simple, and treated a peasant like a brother. He managed his property fairly well, his head was full of all sorts of socialist schemes, which he could no more put into practice than he could finish his articles on the shortcomings of the artillery. He never succeeded in anything, and was known in his regiment as "the failure." Of a sincere, passionate, and morbid nature, he could at a given moment appear merciless, blood-thirsty, deserving to be called a brute; at another, he would be ready to sacrifice himself without a moment's hesitation and without any idea of reward.

At about two miles away from the town the carriage plunged suddenly into the soft darkness of an aspen wood, amidst the rustling of invisible leaves, the fresh moist odour of the forest, with faint patches of light from above and a mass of tangled shadows below. The moon had already risen above the horizon, broad and red like a copper shield. Emerging from the trees, the carriage came upon a small low farm house. Three illuminated windows stood out sharply on the front of the house, which shut out the moon's disc; the wide, open gate looked as if it was never shut. Two white stage-horses, attached to the back of a high trap, were standing in the courtyard, half in obscurity; two puppies, also white, rushed out from somewhere and gave forth piercing, though harmless, barks. People were seen moving in the house—the carriage rolled up to the doorstep, and Markelov, climbing out and feeling with difficulty for the iron carriage step, put on, as is usually the case, by the

domestic blacksmith in the most inconvenient possible place, said to Nejdanov: "Here we are at home. You will find guests here whom you know very well, but little expect to meet. Come in.

Chapter 11

THE guests turned out to be no other than our old friends Mashurina and Ostrodumov. They were both sitting in the poorly- furnished drawing room of Markelov's house, smoking and drinking beer by the light of a kerosene lamp. Neither of them showed the least astonishment when Nejdanov came in, knowing beforehand that Markelov had intended bringing him back, but Nejdanov was very much surprised on seeing them. On his entrance Ostrodumov merely muttered "Good evening," whilst Mashurina turned scarlet and extended her hand. Markelov began to explain that they had come from St. Petersburg about a week ago, Ostrodumov to remain in the province for some time for propaganda purposes, while Mashurina was to go on to K. to meet someone, also in connection with the cause. He then went on to say that the time had now come for them to do something practical, and became suddenly heated, although no one had contradicted him. He bit his lips, and in a hoarse, excited tone of voice began condemning the horrors that were taking place, saying that everything was now in readiness for them to start, that none but cowards could hold back, that a certain amount of violence was just as necessary as the prick of the lancet to the abscess, however ripe it might be! The lancet simile was not original, but one that he had heard somewhere. He seemed to like it, and made use of it on every possible occasion.

Losing all hope of Mariana's love, it seemed that he no longer cared for anything, and was only eager to get to work, to enter the field of action as soon as possible. He spoke harshly, angrily, but straight to the point like the blow of an axe, his words falling from his pale lips monotonously, ponderously, like the savage bark of a grim old watch dog. He said that he was well acquainted with both the peasants and factory men of the neighbourhood, and that there were possible people among them. Instanced a certain Eremy, who, he declared, was prepared to go anywhere at a moment's notice. This man, Eremy, who belonged to the village Goloplok, was constantly on his lips. At nearly every tenth word he

thumped his right hand on the table and waved the left in the air, the forefinger standing away from the others. This sinewy, hairy hand, the finger, hoarse voice, flashing eyes, all produced a strong impression on his hearers.

Markelov had scarcely spoken to Nejdanov on the journey, and all his accumulated wrath burst forth now. Ostrodumov and Mashurina expressed their approval every now and again by a look, a smile, a short exclamation, but a strange feeling came over Nejdanov. He tried to make some sort of objection at first, pointing out the danger of hasty action and mentioned certain former premature attempts. He marvelled at the way in which everything was settled beyond a shadow of a doubt, without taking into consideration the special circumstances, or even trying to find out what the masses really wanted. At last his nerves became so highly strung that they trembled like the strings of an instrument, and with a sort of despair, almost with tears in his eyes, he began speaking at the top of his voice, in the same strain as Markelov, going even farther than he had done. What inspired him would be difficult to say; was it remorse for having been inactive of late, annoyance with himself and with others, a desire to drown the gnawings of an inner pain, or merely to show off before his comrades, whom he had not seen for some time, or had Markelov's words really had some effect upon him, fired his blood? They talked until daybreak; Ostrodumov and Mashurina did not once rise from their seats, while Markelov and Nejdanov remained on their feet all the time. Markelov stood on the same spot for all the world like a sentinel, and Nejdanov walked up and down the room with nervous strides, now slowly, now hurriedly. They spoke of the necessary means and measures to be employed, of the part each must take upon himself, selected and tied up various bundles of pamphlets and leaflets, mentioned a certain merchant, Golushkin, a nonconformist, as a very possible man, although uneducated, then a young propagandist, Kisliakov, who was very clever, but had an exaggerated idea of his own capabilities, and also spoke of Solomin…

"Is that the man who manages a cotton factory?" Nejdanov asked, recalling what Sipiagin had said of him at table.

"Yes, that is the man," Markelov replied. "You should get to know him. We have not sounded him as yet, but I believe he is an extremely capable man."

Eremy of Goloplok was mentioned again, together with Sipiagin's servant, Kirill, and a certain Mendely, known under the name of "Sulks."

The latter it seemed was not to be relied upon. He was very bold when sober, but a coward when drunk, and was nearly always drunk.

"And what about your own people?" Nejdanov asked of Markelov. "Are there any reliable men among them?"

Markelov thought there were, but did not mention anyone by name, however. He went on to talk of the town tradespeople, of the public-school boys, who they thought might come in useful if matters were to come to fisticuffs. Nejdanov also inquired about the gentry of the neighbourhood, and learned from Markelov that there were five or six possible young men—among them, but, unfortunately, the most radical of them was a German, "and you can't trust a German, you know, he is sure to deceive you sooner or later!" They must wait and see what information Kisliakov would gather. Nejdanov also asked about the military, but Markelov hesitated, tugged at his long whiskers, and announced at last that with regard to them nothing certain was known as yet, unless Kisliakov had made any discoveries.

"Who is this Kisliakov? " Nejdanov asked impatiently.

Markelov smiled significantly.

"He's a wonderful person," he declared. "I know very little of him, have only met him twice, but you should see what letters he writes! Marvellous letters! I will show them to you and you can judge for yourself. He is full of enthusiasm. And what activity the man is capable of! He has rushed over the length and breadth of Russia five or six times, and written a twelve-page letter from every place!

Nejdanov looked questioningly at Ostrodumov, but the latter was sitting like a statue, not an eyebrow twitching. Mashurina was also motionless, a bitter smile playing on her lips.

Nejdanov went on to ask Markelov if he had made any socialist experiments on his own estate, but here Ostrodumov interrupted him.

"What is the good of all that?" he asked. "All the same, it will have to be altered afterwards."

The conversation turned to political channels again. The mysterious inner pain again began gnawing at Nejdanov's heart, but the keener the pain, the more positively and loudly he spoke. He had drunk only one glass of beer, but it seemed to him at times that he was quite intoxicated. His head swam around and his heart beat feverishly.

When the discussion came to an end at last at about four o'clock in the morning, and they all passed by the servant asleep in the anteroom on

their way to their own rooms, Nejdanov, before retiring to bed, stood for a long time motionless, gazing straight before him. He was filled with wonder at the proud, heart-rending note in all that Markelov had said. The man's vanity must have been hurt, he must have suffered, but how nobly he forgot his own personal sorrows for that which he held to be the truth. "He is a limited soul," Nejdanov thought, " but is it not a thousand times better to be like that than such … such as I feel myself to be?

He immediately became indignant at his own self-depreciation.

"What made me think that? Am I not also capable of self- sacrifice? Just wait, gentlemen, and you too, Paklin. I will show you all that although I am aesthetic and write verses—"

He pushed back his hair with an angry gesture, ground his teeth, undressed hurriedly, and jumped into the cold, damp bed.

"Goodnight, I am your neighbour," Mashurina's voice was heard from the other side of the door.

"Goodnight," Nejdanov responded, and remembered suddenly that during the whole evening she had not taken her eyes off him.

"What does she want? " he muttered to himself, and instantly felt ashamed. "If only I could get to sleep!

But it was difficult for him to calm his overwrought nerves, and the sun was already high when at last he fell into a heavy, troubled sleep.

In the morning he got up late with a bad headache. He dressed, went up to the window of his attic, and looked out upon Markelov's farm. It was practically a mere nothing; the tiny little house was situated in a hollow by the side of a wood. A small barn, the stables, cellar, and a little hut with a half- bare thatched roof, stood on one side; on the other a small pond, a strip of kitchen garden, a hemp field, another hut with a roof like the first one; in the distance yet another barn, a tiny shed, and an empty thrashing floor—this was all the "wealth" that met the eye. It all seemed poor and decaying, not exactly as if it had been allowed to run wild, but as though it had never flourished, like a young tree that had not taken root well.

When Nejdanov went downstairs, Mashurina was sitting in the dining room at the samovar, evidently waiting for him. She told him that Ostrodumov had gone away on business, in connection with the cause, and would not be back for about a fortnight, and that their host had gone to look after his peasants. As it was already at the end of May, and there was no urgent work to be done, Markelov had thought of felling a small

birch wood, with such means as he had at his command, and had gone down there to see after it.

Nejdanov felt a strange weariness at heart. So much had been said the night before about the impossibility of holding back any longer, about the necessity of making a beginning. "But how could one begin, now, at once?" he asked himself. It was useless talking it over with Mashurina, there was no hesitation for her. She knew that she had to go to K., and beyond that she did not look ahead. Nejdanov was at a loss to know what to say to her, and as soon as he finished his tea took his hat and went out in the direction of the birch wood. On the way he fell in with some peasants carting manure, a few of Markelov's former serfs. He entered into conversation with them, but was very little the wiser for it. They, too, seemed weary, but with a normal physical weariness, quite unlike the sensation experienced by him. They spoke of their master as a kind-hearted gentleman, but rather odd, and predicted his ruin, because be would go his own way, instead of doing as his forefathers had done before him. "And he's so clever, you know, you can't understand what he says, however hard you may try. But he's a good sort." A little farther on Nejdanov came across Markelov himself.

He as surrounded by a whole crowd of labourers, and one could see from the distance that he was trying to explain something to them as hard as he could, but suddenly threw up his arms in despair, as if it were of no use. His bailiff, a small, short-sighted young man without a trace of authority or firmness in his bearing, was walking beside him, and merely kept on repeating, "Just so, sir," to Markelov's great disgust, who had expected more independence from him. Nejdanov went up to Markelov, and on looking into his face was struck by the same expression of spiritual weariness he was himself suffering from. Soon after greeting one another, Markelov began talking again of last night's "problems" (more briefly this time), about the impending revolution, the weary expression never once leaving his face. He was smothered in perspiration and dust, his voice was hoarse, and his clothes were covered all over with bits of wood shavings and pieces of green moss. The labourers stood by silently, half afraid and half amused. Nejdanov glanced at Markelov, and Ostrodumov's remark, "What is the good of it all? All the same, it will have to be altered afterwards," flashed across his mind. One of the men, who had been fined for some offence, began begging Markelov to let him off. The latter got angry, shouted furiously, but forgave him in the end. "All the same, it will have to be altered afterwards."

Nejdanov asked him for horses and a conveyance to take him home. Markelov seemed surprised at the request, but promised to have everything ready in good time. They turned back to the house together, Markelov staggering as he walked.

"What is the matter with you? " Nejdanov asked.

"I am simply worn out!" Markelov began furiously. "No matter what you do, you simply can't make these people understand anything! They are utterly incapable of carrying out an order, and do not even understand plain Russian. If you talk of 'part', they know what that means well enough, but the word 'participation' is utterly beyond their comprehension, just as if it did not belong to the Russian language. They've taken it into their heads that I want to give them a part of the land!"

Markelov had tried to explain to the peasants the principles of cooperation with a view to introducing it on his estate, but they were completely opposed to it. "The pit was deep enough before, but now there's no seeing the bottom of it," one of them remarked, and all the others gave forth a sympathetic sigh, quite crushing poor Markelov. He dismissed the men and went into the house to see about a conveyance and lunch.

The whole of Markelov's household consisted of a man servant, a cook, a coachman, and a very old man with hairy ears, in a long- skirted linen coat, who had once been his grandfather's valet. This old man was for ever gazing at Markelov with a most woe- begone expression on his face. He was too old to do anything, but was always present, huddled together by the door.

After a lunch of hard-boiled eggs, anchovies, and cold hash (the man handing them pepper in an old pomade pot and vinegar in an old eau-de-cologne bottle), Nejdanov took his seat in the same carriage in which he had come the night before. This time it was harnessed to two horses, not three, as the third had been newly shod, and was a little lame.

Markelov had spoken very little during the meal, had eaten nothing whatever, and breathed with difficulty. He let fall a few bitter remarks about his farm and threw up his arms in despair. "All the same, it will have to be altered afterwards!

Mashurina asked Nejdanov if she might come with him as far as the town, where she had a little shopping to do. "I can walk back afterwards or, if need be, ask the first peasant I meet for a lift in his cart."

Markelov accompanied them to the door, saying that he would soon send for Nejdanov again, and then.., then (he trembled suddenly, but pulled himself together) they would have to settle things definitely. Solomin must also come. He (Markelov) was only waiting to hear from Vassily Nikolaevitch, and that as soon as he heard from him there would be nothing to hinder them from making a "beginning," as the masses (the same masses who failed to understand the word "participation") refused to wait any longer!

"Oh, by the way, what about those letters you wanted to show me? What is the fellow's name … Kisliakov?" Nejdanov asked.

"Later on… I will show them to you later on. We can do it all at the same time."

The carriage moved.

"Hold yourself in readiness!" Markelov's voice was heard again, as he stood on the doorstep. And by his side, with the same hopeless dejection in his face, straightening his bent back, his hands clasped behind him, diffusing an odour of rye bread and mustiness, not hearing a single word that was being said around him, stood the model servant, his grandfather's decrepit old valet.

Mashurina sat smoking silently all the way, but when they reached the town gates she gave a loud sigh.

"I feel so sorry for Sergai Mihailovitch," she remarked, her face darkening.

"He is over-worked, and it seems to me his affairs are in a bad way," Nejdanov said.

"I was not thinking of that."

"What were you thinking of then?"

"He is so unhappy and so unfortunate. It would be difficult to find a better man than he is, but he never seems to get on."

Nejdanov looked at her.

"Do you know anything about him?"

"Nothing whatever, but you can see for yourself. Goodbye, Alexai Dmitritch." Mashurina clambered out of the carriage.

An hour later Nejdanov was rolling up the courtyard leading to Sipiagin's house. He did not feel well after his sleepless night and the numerous discussions and explanations.

A beautiful face smiled to him out of the window. It was Madame Sipiagina welcoming him back home.

"What glorious eyes she has!" he thought.

Chapter 12

A GREAT many people came to dinner. When it was over, Nejdanov took advantage of the general bustle and slipped away to his own room. He wanted to be alone with his own thoughts, to arrange the impressions he had carried away from his recent journey. Valentina Mihailovna had looked at him intently several times during dinner, but there had been no opportunity of speaking to him. Mariana, after the unexpected freak which had so bewildered him, was evidently repenting of it, and seemed to avoid him. Nejdanov took up a pen to write to his friend Silin, but he did not know what to say to him. There were so many conflicting thoughts and sensations crowding in upon him that he did not attempt to disentangle them, and put them off for another day.

Kollomietzev had made one of the guests at dinner. Never before had this worthy shown so much insolence and snobbish contemptuousness as on this occasion, but Nejdanov simply ignored him.

He was surrounded by a sort of mist, which seemed to hang before him like a filmy curtain, separating him from the rest of the world. And through this film, strange to say, he perceived only three faces—women's faces—and all three were gazing at him intently. They were Madame Sipiagina, Mashurina, and Mariana. What did it mean? Why particularly these three? What had they in common, and what did they want of him?

He went to bed early, but could not fall asleep. He was haunted by sad and gloomy reflections about the inevitable end— death. These thoughts were familiar to him, many times had he turned them over this way and that, first shuddering at the probability of annihilation, then welcoming it, almost rejoicing in it. Suddenly a peculiarly familiar agitation took possession of him… He mused awhile, sat down at the table, and wrote down the following lines in his sacred copy-book, without a single correction:

When I die, dear friend, remember This desire I tell to thee: Burn thou to the last black ember All my heart has writ for me. Let the fairest flowers surround me, Sunlight laugh about my bed, Let the sweetest of musicians To the door of death be led. Bid them sound no strain of sadness— Muted string or muffled drum; Come to me with songs of gladness— Whirling in the wild waltz come! I would hear—ere yet I hear not— Trembling strings their cadence keep, Chords that quiver: so I also Tremble as I fall asleep. Memories of life and laughter, Memories of earthly glee, As I go to the hereafter All my lullaby shall be.

When he wrote the word "friend" he thought of Silin. He read the verses over to himself in an undertone, and was surprised at what had come from his pen. This scepticism, this indifference, this almost frivolous lack of faith—how did it all agree with his principles? How did it agree with what he had said at Markelov's? He thrust the copybook into the table drawer and went back to bed. But he did not fall asleep until dawn, when the larks had already begun to twitter and the sky was turning paler.

On the following day, soon after he had finished his lesson and was sitting in the billiard room, Madame Sipiagina entered, looked round cautiously, and coming up to him with a smile, invited him to come into her boudoir. She had on a white barege dress, very simple, but extremely pretty. The embroidered frills of her sleeves came down as far as the elbow, a broad ribbon encircled her waist, her hair fell in thick curls about her neck. Everything about her was inviting and caressing, with a sort of restrained, yet encouraging, caressiveness, everything; the subdued lustre of her half-closed eyes, the soft indolence of her voice, her gestures, her very walk. She conducted Nejdanov into her boudoir, a cosy, charming room, filled with the scent of flowers and perfumes, the pure freshness of feminine garments, the constant presence of a woman. She made him sit down in an armchair, sat down beside him, and began questioning him about his visit, about Markelov's way of living, with much tact and sweetness. She showed a genuine interest in her brother, although she had not once mentioned him in Nejdanov's presence. One could gather from what she said that the impression Mariana had made on her brother had not escaped her notice. She seemed a little disappointed, but whether it was due to the fact that Mariana did not reciprocate his feelings, or that his choice should have fallen upon a girl so utterly unlike him, was not quite clear. But most of all she evidently strove to soften Nejdanov, to arouse his confidence towards her, to break down

his shyness; she even went so far as to reproach him a little for having a false idea of her.

Nejdanov listened to her, gazed at her arms, her shoulders, and from time to time cast a look at her rosy lips and her unruly, massive curls. His replies were brief at first; he felt a curious pressure in his throat and chest, but by degrees this sensation gave way to another, just as disturbing, but not devoid of a certain sweetness… . He was surprised that such a beautiful aristocratic lady of important position should take the trouble to interest herself in him, a simple student, and not only interest herself, but flirt with him a little besides. He wondered, but could not make out her object in doing so. To tell the truth, he was little concerned about the object. Madame Sipiagina went on to speak of Kolia, and assured Nejdanov that she wished to become better acquainted with him only so that she might talk to him seriously about her son, get to know his views on the education of Russian children. It might have seemed a little curious that such a wish should have come upon her so suddenly, but the root of the matter did not lie in what Valentina Mihailovna had said. She had been seized by a wave of sensuousness, a desire to conquer and bring to her feet this rebellious young man.

Here it is necessary to go back a little. Valentina Mihailovna was the daughter of a general who had been neither over-wise nor over-industrious in his life. He had received only one star and a buckle as a reward for fifty years' service. She was a Little Russian, intriguing and sly, endowed, like many of her countrywomen, with a very simple and even stupid exterior, from which she knew how to extract the maximum of advantage. Valentina Mihailovna's parents were not rich, but they had managed to educate her at the Smolny Convent, where, although considered a republican, she was always in the foreground and very well treated on account of her excellent behaviour and industriousness. On leaving the convent she settled with her mother (her brother had gone into the country, and her father, the general with the star and buckle, had died) in a very clean, but extremely chilly, apartment, in which you could see your own breath as you talked. Valentina Mihailovna used to make fun of it and declare it was like being in church. She was very brave in bearing with all the discomforts of a poor, pinched existence, having a wonderfully sweet temper. With her mother's help, she managed both to keep up and make new connections and acquaintances, and was even spoken of in the highest circles as a very nice well-bred girl. She had several suitors, had fixed upon Sipiagin from them all, and had very quickly and ingeniously made him fall in love with her. However,

he was soon convinced that he could not have made a better choice. She was intelligent, rather good than ill-natured, at bottom cold and indifferent, but unable to endure the idea that anyone should be indifferent to her.

Valentina Mihailovna was possessed of that peculiar charm, the characteristic of all "charming" egoists, in which there is neither poetry nor real sensitiveness, but which is often full of superficial gentleness, sympathy, sometimes even tenderness. But these charming egoists must not be thwarted. They are very domineering and cannot endure independence in others. Women like Madame Sipiagina excite and disturb people of inexperienced and passionate natures, but are fond of a quiet and peaceful life themselves. Virtue comes easy to them, they are placid of temperament, but a constant desire to command, to attract, and to please gives them mobility and brilliance. They have an iron will, and a good deal of their fascination is due to this will. It is difficult for a man to hold his ground when the mysterious sparks of tenderness begin to kindle, as if involuntarily, in one of these unstirred creatures; he waits for the hour to come when the ice will melt, but the rays only play over the transparent surface, and never does he see it melt or its smoothness disturbed!

It cost Madame Sipiagina very little to flirt, knowing full well that it involved no danger for herself, but to take the lustre out of another's eyes and see them sparkle again, to see another's cheeks become flushed with desire and dread, to hear another's voice tremble and break down, to disturb another's soul—oh, how sweet it was to her soul! How delightful it was late at night, when she lay down in her snow-white bed to an untroubled sleep, to remember all these agitated words and looks and sighs. With what a self-satisfied smile she retired into herself, into the consciousness of her inaccessibility, her invulnerability, and with what condescension she abandoned herself to the lawful embrace of her well-bred husband! It was so pleasant that for a little time she was filled with emotion, ready to do some kind deed, to help a fellow creature… Once, after a secretary of legation, who was madly in love with her, had attempted to cut his throat, she founded a small alms- house! She had prayed for him fervently, although her religious feelings from earliest childhood had not been strongly developed.

And so she talked to Nejdanov, doing everything she could to bring him to her feet. She allowed him to come near her, she revealed herself to him, as it were, and with a sweet curiosity, with a half-maternal tenderness, she watched this handsome, interesting, stern radical softening towards her quietly and awkwardly. A day, an hour, a minute later and all

this would have vanished without leaving a trace, but for the time being it was pleasant, amusing, rather pathetic, and even a little sad. Forgetting his origin, and knowing that such interest is always appreciated by lonely people happening to fall among strangers, she began questioning him about his youth, about his family… But guessing from his curt replies that she had made a mistake, Valentina Mihailovna tried to smooth things over and began to unfold herself still more before him, as a rose unfolds its fragrant petals on a hot summer's noon, closing them again tightly at the first approach of the evening coolness.

She could not fully smooth over her blunder, however. Having been touched on a sensitive spot, Nejdanov could not regain his former confidence. That bitterness which he always carried, always felt at the bottom of his heart, stirred again, awakening all his democratic suspicions and reproaches. "That is not what I've come here for," he thought, recalling Paklin's admonition. He took advantage of a pause in the conversation, got up, bowed slightly, and went out "very foolishly" as he could not help saying to himself afterwards.

His confusion did not escape Valentina Mihailovna's notice, and judging by the smile with which she accompanied him, she had put it down to her own advantage.

In the billiard room Nejdanov came across Mariana. She was standing with her back to the window, not far from the door of Madame Sipiagina's boudoir, with her arms tightly folded. Her face was almost in complete shadow, but she fixed her fearless eyes on Nejdanov so penetratingly, and her tightly closed lips expressed so much contempt and insulting pity, that he stood still in amazement.

"Have you anything to say to me?" he asked involuntarily.

Mariana did not reply for a time.

"No … yes I have, though not now."

"When?"

"You must wait awhile. Perhaps—tomorrow, perhaps—never. I know so little—what are you really like?"

"But," Nejdanov began, "I sometimes feel … that between us—"

"But you hardly know me at all," Mariana interrupted him. "Well, wait a little. Tomorrow, perhaps. Now I have to go to … my mistress. Goodbye, till tomorrow."

Nejdanov took a step or two in advance, but turned back suddenly.

"By the way, Mariana Vikentievna … may I come to school with you one day before it closes? I should like to see what you do there."

"With pleasure… But it was not the school about which I wished to speak to you."

"What was it then?"

"Tomorrow," Mariana repeated.

But she did not wait until the next day, and the conversation between her and Nejdanov took place on that same evening in one of the linden avenues not far from the terrace.

Chapter 13

SHE came up to him first.

"Mr. Nejdanov," she began, "it seems that you are quite enchanted with Valentina Mihailovna."

She turned down the avenue without waiting for a reply; he walked by her side.

"What makes you think so?"

"Is it not a fact? In that case she behaved very foolishly today. I can imagine how concerned she must have been, and how she tried to cast her wary nets!"

Nejdanov did not utter a word, but looked at his companion sideways.

"Listen," she continued, "it's no use pretending; I don't like Valentina Mihailovna, and you know that well enough. I may seem unjust … but I want you to hear me first—"

Mariana's voice gave way. She suddenly flushed with emotion; under emotion she always gave one the impression of being angry.

"You are no doubt asking yourself, 'Why does this tiresome young lady tell me all this?' just as you must have done when I spoke to you … about Mr. Markelov."

She bent down, tore off a small mushroom, broke it to pieces, and threw it away.

"You are quite mistaken, Mariana Vikentievna," Nejdanov remarked. "On the contrary, I am pleased to think that I inspire you with confidence."

This was not true, the idea had only just occurred to him.

Mariana glanced at him for a moment. Until then she had persistently looked away from him.

"It is not that you inspire me with confidence exactly," she went on pensively; "you are quite a stranger to me. But your position- -and

mine—are very similar. We are both alike— unhappy; that is a bond between us."

"Are you unhappy?" Nejdanov asked.

"And you, are you not?" Mariana asked in her turn. Nejdanov did not say anything.

"Do you know my story?" she asked quickly. "The story of my father's exile? Don't you? Well, here it is: He was arrested, tried, convicted, deprived of his rank and everything … and sent to Siberia, where he died. My mother died too. My uncle, Mr. Sipiagin, my mother's brother, brought me up… I am dependent upon him— he is my benefactor and— Valentina Mihailovna is my benefactress… . I pay them back with base ingratitude because I have an unfeeling heart… But the bread of charity is bitter— and I can't bear insulting condescensions— and can't endure to be patronised. I can't hide things, and when I'm constantly being hurt I only keep from crying out because I'm too proud to do so."

As she uttered these disjointed sentences, Mariana walked faster and faster. Suddenly she stopped. "Do you know that my aunt, in order to get rid of me, wants to marry me to that hateful Kollomietzev? She knows my ideas… in her eyes I'm almost a nihilist— and he! It's true he doesn't care for me… I'm not good-looking enough, but it's possible to sell me. That would also be considered charity."

"Why didn't you—" Nejdanov began, but stopped short.

Mariana looked at him for an instant.

"You wanted to ask why I didn't accept Mr. Markelov, isn't that so? Well, what could I do? He's a good man, but it's not my fault that I don't love him."

Mariana walked on ahead, as if she wished to save her companion the necessity of saying anything to this unexpected confession.

They both reached the end of the avenue. Mariana turned quickly down a narrow path leading into a dense fir grove; Nejdanov followed her. He was under the influence of a twofold astonishment; first, it puzzled him that this shy girl should suddenly become so open and frank with him, and secondly, that he was not in the least surprised at this frankness, that he looked upon it, in fact, as quite natural.

Mariana turned round suddenly, stopped in the middle of the path with her face about a yard from Nejdanov's, and looked straight into his eyes.

"Alexai Dmitritch," she said, "please don't think my aunt is a bad woman. She is not. She is deceitful all over, she's an actress, a poser— she wants everyone to bow down before her as a beauty and worship her as a saint! She will invent a pretty speech, say it to one person, repeat it to a second, a third, with an air as if it had only just come to her by inspiration, emphasising it by the use of her wonderful eyes! She understands herself very well— she is fully conscious of looking like a Madonna, and knows that she does not love a living soul! She pretends to be forever worrying over Kolia, when in reality does nothing but talk about him with clever people. She does not wish harm to any one… is all kindness, but let every bone in your body be broken before her very eyes … and she wouldn't care a straw! She would not move a finger to save you, and if by any chance it should happen to be necessary or useful to her… then heaven have mercy on you… ."

Mariana ceased. Her wrath was choking her. She could not contain herself, and had resolved on giving full vent to it, but words failed her. Mariana belonged to a particular class of unfortunate beings, very plentiful in Russia, whom justice satisfies, but does not rejoice, while injustice, against which they are very sensitive, revolts them to their innermost being. All the time she was speaking, Nejdanov watched her intently. Her flushed face, her short, untidy hair, the tremulous twitching of her thin lips, struck him as menacing, significant, and beautiful. A ray of sunlight, broken by a net of branches, lay across her forehead like a patch of gold. And this tongue of fire seemed to be in keeping with the keen expression of her face, her fixed wide-open eyes, the earnest sound of her voice.

"Tell me why you think me unhappy," Nejdanov observed at last. "Do you know anything about me?

"Yes."

"What do you know? Has anyone been talking to you about me?

"I know about your birth."

"Who told you?

"Why, Valentina Mihailovna, of course, whom you admire so much. She mentioned in my presence, just in passing you know, but quite intentionally, that there was a very interesting incident in your life. She was not condoling the fact, but merely mentioned it as a person of advanced views who is above prejudice. You need not be surprised; in the same way she tells every visitor that comes that my father was sent to Siberia for taking bribes. However much she may think herself an

aristocrat, she is nothing more than a mere scandal-monger and a poser. That is your Sistine Madonna!"

"Why is she mine in particular?

Mariana turned away and resumed her walk down the path.

"Because you had such a long conversation together," she said, a lump rising in her throat.

"I scarcely said a word the whole time," Nejdanov observed. "It was she who did the talking."

Mariana walked on in silence. A turn in the path brought them to the end of the grove in front of which lay a small lawn; a weeping silver birch stood in the middle, its hollow trunk encircled by a round seat. Mariana sat down on this seat and Nejdanov seated himself at her side. The long hanging branches covered with tiny green leaves were waving gently over their heads. Around them masses of lily-of-the-valley could be seen peeping out from amidst the fine grass. The whole place was filled with a sweet scent, refreshing after the very heavy resinous smell of the pine trees.

"So you want to see the school," Mariana began; " I must warn you that you will not find it very exciting. You have heard that our principal master is the deacon. He is not a bad fellow, but you can't imagine what nonsense he talks to the children. There is a certain boy among them, called Garacy, an orphan of nine years old, and, would you believe it, he learns better than any of the others!

With the change of conversation, Mariana herself seemed to change. She turned paler, became more composed, and her face assumed an expression of embarrassment, as if she were repenting of her outburst. She evidently wished to lead Nejdanov into discussing some "question" or other about the school, the peasants, anything, so as not to continue in the former strain. But he was far from "questions" at this moment.

"Mariana Vikentievna," he began; "to be quite frank with you, I little expected all that has happened between us." (At the word "happened" she drew herself up.) "It seems to me that we have suddenly become very … very intimate. That is as it should be. We have for some time past been getting closer to one another, only we have not expressed it in words. And so I will also speak to you frankly. It is no doubt wretched for you here, but surely your uncle, although he is limited, seems a kind man, as far as one can judge. Doesn't he understand your position and take your part?"

"My uncle, in the first place, is not a man, he's an official, a senator, or a minister, I forget which; and in the second, I don't want to complain and speak badly of people for nothing. It is not at all hard for me here, that is, nobody interferes with me; my aunt's petty pin-pricks are in reality nothing to me… I am quite free."

Nejdanov looked at her in amazement.

"In that case … everything that you have just told me—"

"You may laugh at me if you like," she said. "If I am unhappy—it is not as a result of my own sorrows. It sometimes seems to me that I suffer for the miserable, poor and oppressed in the whole of Russia… No, it's not exactly that. I suffer— I am indignant for them, I rebel for them… I am ready to go to the stake for them. I am unhappy because I am a 'young lady,' a parasite, that I am completely unable to do anything … anything! When my father was sent to Siberia and I remained with my mother in Moscow, how I longed to go to him! It was not that I loved or respected him very much, but I wanted to know, to see with my own eyes, how the exiled and banished live… How I loathed myself and all these placid, rich, well-fed people! And afterwards, when he returned home, broken in body and soul, and began humbly busying himself, trying to work … oh … how terrible it was! It was a good thing that he died … and my poor mother too. But, unfortunately, I was left behind… . What for? Only to feel that I have a bad nature, that I am ungrateful, that there is no peace for me, that I can do nothing— nothing for anything or anybody!"

Mariana turned away— her hand slid on to the seat. Nejdanov felt sorry for her; he touched the drooping hand. Mariana pulled it away quickly; not that Nejdanov's action seemed unsuitable to her, but that he should on no account think that she was asking for sympathy.

Through the branches of the pines a glimpse of a woman's dress could be seen. Mariana drew herself up.

"Look, your Madonna has sent her spy. That maid has to keep a watch on me and inform her mistress where I am and with whom. My aunt very likely guessed that I was with you, and thought it improper, especially after the sentimental scene she acted before you this afternoon. Anyhow, it's time we were back. Let us go."

Mariana got up. Nejdanov rose also. She glanced at him over her shoulder, and suddenly there passed over her face an almost childish expression, making her embarrassment seem charming.

"You are not angry with me, are you? You don't think I have been trying to win your sympathy, do you? No, I'm sure you don't," she went on before Nejdanov had time to make any reply; "you are like me, just as unhappy, and your nature … is bad, like mine. We can go to the school together tomorrow. We are excellent friends now, aren't we?

When Mariana and Nejdanov drew near to the house, Valentina Mihailovna looked at them from the balcony through her lorgnette, shook her head slowly with a smile on her lips, then returning through the open glass door into the drawing-room, where Sipiagin was already seated at preferences with their toothless neighbour, who had dropped in to tea, she drawled out, laying stress on each syllable: "How damp the air is! It's not good for one's health!"

Mariana and Nejdanov exchanged glances; Sipiagin, who had just scored a trick from his partner, cast a truly ministerial glance at his wife, looking her over from top to toe, then transferred this same cold, sleepy, but penetrating glance to the young couple coming in from the dark garden.

Chapter 14

Two more weeks went by; everything in its accustomed order. Sipiagin fixed everyone's daily occupation, if not like a minister, at any rate like the director of a department, and was, as usual, haughty, humane, and somewhat fastidious. Kolia continued taking lessons; Anna Zaharovna, still full of spite, worried about him constantly; visitors came and went, talked, played at cards, and did not seem bored. Valentina Mihailovna continued amusing herself with Nejdanov, although her customary affability had become mixed with a certain amount of good-natured sarcasm. Nejdanov had become very intimate with Mariana, and discovered that her temper was even enough and that one could discuss most things with her without hitting against any violent opposition. He had been to the school with her once or twice, but with the first visit had become convinced that he could do nothing there. It was under the entire control of the deacon, with Sipiagin's full consent. The good father did not teach grammar badly, although his method was rather old-fashioned, but at examinations he would put the most absurd questions. For instance, he once asked Garacy how he would explain the expression, "The waters are dark under the firmament," to which Garacy had to answer, by the deacon's own order, "It cannot be explained." However, the school was soon closed for the summer, not to be opened again until the autumn.

Bearing in mind the suggestion of Paklin and others, Nejdanov did all he could to come in contact with the peasants, but soon found that he was only learning to understand them, in so far as he could make any observation and doing no propaganda whatever! Nejdanov had lived in a town all his life and, consequently, between him and the country people there existed a gulf that could not be crossed. He once happened to exchange a few words with the drunken Kirill, and even with Mendely the Sulky, hut besides abuse about things in general he got nothing out of them. Another peasant, called Fituvy, completely nonplussed him. This peasant had an unusually energetic countenance, almost like some brigand. "Well, this one seems hopeful at any rate,"

Nejdanov thought. But it turned out that Fituvy was a miserable wretch, from whom the mir had taken away his land, because he, a strong healthy man, WOULD NOT work. "I can't," he sobbed out, with deep inward groans, "I can't work! Kill me or I'll lay hands on myself!" And he ended by begging alms in the streets! With a face out of a canvas of Rinaldo Rinaldini!

As for the factory men, Nejdanov could not get hold of them at all; these fellows were either too sharp or too gloomy. He wrote a long letter to his friend Silin about the whole thing, in which he bitterly regretted his incapacity, putting it down to the vile education he had received and to his hopelessly aesthetic nature! He suddenly came to the conclusion that his vocation in the field of propaganda lay not in speaking, but in writing. But all the pamphlets he planned did not work out somehow. Whatever he attempted to put down on paper, according to him, was too drawn out, artificial in tone and style, and once or twice—oh horror! he actually found himself wandering off into verse, or on a sceptical, personal effusion. He even decided to speak about this difficulty to Mariana, a very sure sign of confidence and intimacy! He was again surprised to find her sympathetic, not towards his literary attempts, certainly, but to the moral weakness he was suffering from, a weakness with which she, too, was somewhat familiar. Mariana's contempt for aestheticism was no less strong than his, but for all that the main reason why she did not accept Markelov was because there was not the slightest trace of the aesthetic in his nature!

She did not for a moment admit this to herself. It is often the case that what is strongest in us remains only a half-suspected secret.

Thus the days went by slowly, with little variety, but with sufficient interest.

A curious change was taking place in Nejdanov. He felt dissatisfied with himself, that is, with his inactivity, and his words had a constant ring of bitter self-reproach. But in the innermost depths of his being there lurked a sense of happiness very soothing to his soul. Was it a result of the peaceful country life, the summer, the fresh air, dainty food, beautiful home, or was it due to the fact that for the first time in his life he was tasting the sweetness of contact with a woman's soul? It would he difficult to say. But he felt happy, although he complained, and quite sincerely, to his friend Silin.

The mood, however, was abruptly destroyed in a single day.

On the morning of this day Nejdanov received a letter from Vassily Nikolaevitch, instructing him, together with Markelov, to lose no time in coming to an understanding with Solomin and a certain merchant Golushkin, an Old Believer, living at S. This letter upset Nejdanov very much; it contained a note of reproach at his inactivity. The bitterness which had shown itself only in his words now rose with full force from the depths of his soul.

Kollomietzev came to dinner, disturbed and agitated. "Would you believe it!" he shouted almost in tears, "what horrors I've read in the papers! My friend, my beloved Michael, the Servian prince, has been assassinated by some blackguards in Belgrade. This is what these Jacobins and revolutionists will bring us to if a firm stop is not put to them all!" Sipiagin permitted himself to remark that this horrible murder was probably not the work of Jacobins, "of whom there could hardly be any in Servia," but might have been committed by some of the followers of the Karageorgievsky party, enemies of Obrenovitch. Kollomietzev would not hear of this, and began to relate, in the same tearful voice, how the late prince had loved him and what a beautiful gun he had given him! Having spent himself somewhat and got rather irritable, he at last turned from foreign Jacobins to home-bred nihilists and socialists, and ended by flying into a passion. He seized a large roll, and breaking it in half over his soup plate, in the manner of the stylish Parisian in the "Cafe-Riche," announced that he would like to tear limb from limb, reduce to ashes, all those who objected to anybody or to anything! These were his very words. "It is high time! High time!" he announced, raising the spoon to his mouth; "yes, high time!" he repeated, giving his glass to the servant, who was pouring out sherry. He spoke reverentially about the great Moscow publishers, and Ladislas, notre bon et cher Ladislas, did not leave his lips. At this point, he fixed his eyes on Nejdanov, seeming to say: "There, this is for you! Make what you like of it! I mean this for you! And there's a lot more to come yet!" The latter, no longer able to contain himself, objected at last, and began in a slightly unsteady tone of voice (not due to fear, of course) defending the ideals, the hopes, the principles of the modern generation. Kollomietzev soon went into a squeak—his anger always expressed itself in falsetto—and became abusive. Sipiagin, with a stately air, began taking Nejdanov's part; Valentina Mihailovna, of course, sided with her husband; Anna Zaharovna tried to distract Kolia's attention, looking furiously at everybody; Mariana did not move, she seemed turned to stone.

Nejdanov, hearing the name of Ladislas pronounced at least for the twentieth time, suddenly flared up and thumping the palm of his hand on the table burst out:

"What an authority! As if we do not know who this Ladislas is! A born spy, nothing more!"

"W-w-w-what—what—did you say? " Kollomietzev stammered cut, choking with rage. "How dare you express yourself like that of a man who is respected by such people as Prince Blasenkramf and Prince Kovrishkin!"

Nejdanov shrugged his shoulders.

"A very nice recommendation! Prince Kovrishkin, that enthusiastic flunky—"

"Ladislas is my friend," Kollomietzev screamed, "my comrade—and I—"

"So much the worse for you," Nejdanov interrupted him. "It means that you share his way of thinking, in which case my words apply to you too."

Kollomietzev turned deadly pale with passion.

"W-what? How? You—ought to be— on the spot—"

"What would you like to do with me ON THE SPOT?" Nejdanov asked with sarcastic politeness. Heaven only knows what this skirmish between these two enemies might have led to, had not Sipiagin himself put a stop to it at the very outset. Raising his voice and putting on a serious air, in which it was difficult to say what predominated most, the gravity of an important statesman or the dignity of a host, he announced firmly that he did not wish to hear at his table such immoderate expressions, that he had long ago made it a rule, a sacred rule, he added, to respect every sort of conviction, so long as (at this point he raised his forefinger ornamented with a signet ring) it came within the limits of decent behaviour; that if he could not help, on the one hand, condemning Mr. Nejdanov's intemperate words, for which only his extreme youth could be blamed, he could not, on the other, agree with Mr. Kollomietzev's embittered attack on people of an opposite camp, an attack, he felt sure, that was only due to an over-amount of zeal for the general welfare of society.

"Under my roof," he wound up, "under the Sipiagin's roof, there are no Jacobins and no spies, only honest, well-meaning people, who, once

learning to understand one another, would most certainly clasp each other by the hand!"

Neither Nejdanov nor Kollomietzev ventured on another word, but they did not, however, clasp each other's hands. Their moment for a mutual understanding had not arrived. On the contrary, they had never yet experienced such a strong antipathy to one another.

Dinner ended in an awkward, unpleasant silence. Sipiagin attempted to relate some diplomatic anecdote, but stopped half- way through. Mariana kept looking down at her plate persistently, not wishing to betray her sympathy with what Nejdanov had said. She was by no means afraid, but did not wish to give herself away before Madame Sipiagina. She felt the latter's keen, penetrating glance fixed on her. And, indeed, Madame Sipiagina did not take her eyes either off her or Nejdanov. His unexpected outburst at first came as a surprise to the intelligent lady, but the next moment a light suddenly dawned upon her, so that she involuntarily murmured, "Ah!" She suddenly divined that Nejdanov was slipping away from her, this same Nejdanov who, a short time ago, was ready to come to her arms. "Something has happened… . Is it Mariana? Of course it's Mariana… She likes him … and he—"

"Something must be done." Thus she concluded her reflections, while Kollomietzev was choking with indignation. Even when playing preference two hours later, he pronounced the word "Pass!" or "I buy!" with an aching heart. A hoarse tremulo of wounded pride could be detected in his voice, although he pretended to scorn such things! Sipiagin was the only one really pleased with the scene. It had afforded him an opportunity of showing off the power of his eloquence and of calming the rising storm. He knew Latin, and Virgil's Quos ego was not unfamiliar to him. He did not consciously compare himself to Neptune, but thought of him with a kind of sympathetic feeling.

Chapter 15

As soon as it was convenient for him to do so, Nejdanov retired to his own room and locked himself in. He did not want to see anyone, anyone except Mariana. Her room was situated at the very end of a long corridor, intersecting the whole of the upper story. Nejdanov had only once been there for a few moments, but it seemed to him that she would not mind if he knocked at her door, now that she even wished to speak to him herself. It was already fairly late, about ten o'clock. The host and hostess had not considered it necessary to disturb him after what had taken place at the dinner table. Valentina Mihailovna inquired once or twice about Mariana, as she too had disappeared soon after dinner. "Where is Mariana Vikentievna?" she asked first in Russian, then in French, addressing herself to no one in particular, but rather to the walls, as people often do when greatly astonished, but she soon became absorbed in the game.

Nejdanov paced up and down the room several times, then turned down the corridor and knocked gently at Mariana's door. There was no response. He knocked again— then he turned the handle of the door. It was locked. But he had hardly got back to his own room and sat down, when the door creaked softly and Mariana's voice was heard: "Alexai Dmitritch, was that YOU, that came to me?

He jumped up instantly and rushed out into the corridor. Mariana was standing at his door with a candle in her hand, pale and motionless.

"Yes … I—" he murmured.

"Come," she said, turning down the corridor, but before reaching the end she stopped and pushed open a low door. Nejdanov looked into a small, almost bare room.

"We had better go in here, Alexai Dmitritch, no one will disturb us here."

Nejdanov obeyed. Mariana put the candlestick on a window-sill and turned to him.

"I understand why you wanted to see me," she began. "It is wretched for you to live in this house, and for me too."

"Yes, I wanted to see you, Mariana Vikentievna," Nejdanov replied, " but I do not feel wretched here since I've come to know you."

Mariana smiled pensively.

"Thank you, Alexai Dmitritch. But tell me, do you really intend stopping here after all that has happened?"

"I don't think they will keep me— I shall be dismissed," Nejdanov replied.

"But don't you intend going away of your own accord?"

"I… No!"

"Why not?"

"Do you want to know the truth? Because you are here." Mariana lowered her head and moved a little further down the room.

"Besides," Nejdanov continued, "I MUST stay here. You know nothing— but I want— I feel that I must tell you everything." He approached Mariana and seized her hand; she did not take it away, but only looked straight into his face. "Listen!" he exclaimed with sudden force, "Listen!"

And instantly, without stopping to sit down, although there were two or three chairs in the room, still standing before her and holding her hand, with heated enthusiasm and with an eloquence, surprising even to himself, he began telling her all his plans, his intentions, his reason for having accepted Sipiagin's offer, about all his connections, acquaintances, about his past, things that he had always kept hidden from everybody. He told her about Vassily Nikolaevitch's letters, everything— even about Silin! He spoke hurriedly, without a single pause or the smallest hesitation, as if he were reproaching himself for not having entrusted her with all his secrets before— as if he were begging her pardon. She listened to him attentively, greedily; she was bewildered at first, but this feeling soon wore off. Her heart was overflowing with gratitude, pride, devotion, resoluteness. Her face and eyes shone; she laid her other hand on Nejdanov's— her lips parted in ecstasy. She became marvellously beautiful!

He ceased at last, and suddenly seemed to see THIS face for the first time, although it was so dear and so familiar to him. He gave a deep sigh.

"Ah! how well I did to tell you everything!" He was scarcely able to articulate the words.

"Yes, how well— how well!" she repeated, also in a whisper. She imitated him unconsciously— her voice, too, gave way. "And it means," she continued, "that I am at your disposal, that I want to be useful to your cause, that I am ready to do anything that may be necessary, go wherever you may want me to, that I have always longed with my whole soul for all the things that you want—"

She also ceased. Another word— and her emotion would have dissolved into tears. All the strength and force of her nature suddenly softened as wax. She was consumed with a thirst for activity, for self-sacrifice, for immediate self-sacrifice.

A sound of footsteps was heard from the other side of the door— light, rapid, cautious footsteps.

Mariana suddenly drew herself up and disengaged her hands; her mood changed, she became quite cheerful, a certain audacious, scornful expression flitted across her face.

"I know who is listening behind the door at this moment," she remarked, so loudly that every word could be heard distinctly in the corridor; "Madame Sipiagina is listening to us … but it makes no difference to me."

The footsteps ceased.

"Well?" Mariana asked, turning to Nejdanov. "What shall I do? How shall I help you? Tell me… tell me quickly! What shall I do?"

"I don't know yet," Nejdanov replied. "I have received a note from Markelov—"

"When did you receive it? When? "

"This evening. He and I must go and see Solomin at the factory tomorrow."

"Yes … yes… . What a splendid man Markelov is! Now he's a real friend!"

"Like me"

"No—not like you."

"How?

She turned away suddenly.

"Oh! Don't you understand what you have become for me, and what I am feeling at this moment?"

Nejdanov's heart beat violently; he looked down. This girl who loved him—a poor, homeless wretch, who trusted him, who was ready to follow him, pursue the same cause together with him— this wonderful girl— Mariana— became for Nejdanov at this moment the incarnation of all earthly truth and goodness— the incarnation of the love of mother, sister, wife, all the things he had never known; the incarnation of his country, happiness, struggle, freedom!

He raised his head and encountered her eyes fixed on him again.

Oh, how this sweet, bright glance penetrated to his very soul!

"And so," he began in an unsteady voice, "I am going away tomorrow… And when I come back, I will tell… you— " (he suddenly felt it awkward to address Mariana as "you") "tell you everything that is decided upon. From now on everything that I do and think, everything, I will tell thee first."

"Oh, my dear!" Mariana exclaimed, seizing his hand again. "I promise thee the same!"

The word "thee" escaped her lips just as simply and easily as if they had been old comrades.

"Have you got the letter?"

"Here it is."

Mariana scanned the letter and looked up at him almost reverently.

"Do they entrust you with such important commissions?" He smiled in reply and put the letter back in his pocket. "How curious," he said, "we have come to know of our love, we love one another— and yet we have not said a single word about it."

"There is no need," Mariana whispered, and suddenly threw her arms around his neck and pressed her head closely against his breast. They did not kiss— it would have seemed to them too commonplace and rather terrible— but instantly took leave of one another, tightly clasping each other's hands.

Mariana returned for the candle which she had left on the window- sill of the empty room. Only then a sort of bewilderment came over her; she extinguished the candle and, gliding quickly along the dark corridor, entered her own room, undressed and went to bed in the soothing darkness.

Chapter 16

ON awakening the following morning, Nejdanov did not feel the slightest embarrassment at what had taken place the previous night, but was, on the contrary, filled with a sort of quiet joy, as if he had fulfilled something which ought to have been done long ago. Asking for two days' leave from Sipiagin, who consented readily, though with a certain amount of severity, Nejdanov set out for Markelov's. Before his departure he managed to see Mariana. She was also not in the least abashed, looked at him calmly and resolutely, and called him "dear" quite naturally. She was very much concerned about what he might hear at Markelov's, and begged him to tell her everything.

"Of course!" he replied. "After all," he thought, "why should we be disturbed? In our friendship personal feeling played only … a secondary part, and we are united forever. In the name of the cause? Yes, in the name of the cause!"

Thus Nejdanov thought, and he did not himself suspect how much truth and how much falsehood there lay in his reflections.

He found Markelov in the same weary, sullen frame of mind. After a very impromptu dinner they set out in the well-known carriage to the merchant Falyeva's cotton factory where Solomin lived. (The second side horse harnessed to the carriage was a young colt that had never been in harness before. Markelov's own horse was still a little lame.)

Nejdanov's curiosity had been aroused. He very much wanted to become closer acquainted with a man about whom he had heard so much of late. Solomin had been informed of their coming, so that as soon as the two travellers stopped at the gates of the factory and announced who they were, they were immediately conducted into the hideous little wing occupied by the "engineering manager." He was at that time in the main body of the building, and while one of the workmen ran to fetch him, Nejdanov and Markelov managed to go up to the window and look around. The factory was apparently in a very flourishing condition and

over-loaded with work. From every corner came the quick buzzing sound of unceasing activity; the puffing and rattling of machines, the creaking of looms, the humming of wheels, the whirling of straps, while trolleys, barrels, and loaded carts were rolling in and out. Orders were shouted out at the top of the voice amidst the sound of bells and whistles; workmen in blouses with girdles round their waists, their hair fastened with straps, work girls in print dresses, hurried quickly to and fro, harnessed horses were led about.

It represented the hum of a thousand human beings working with all their might. Everything went at full speed in fairly regular order, but not only was there an absence of smartness and neatness, but there was not the smallest trace or cleanliness to be seen anywhere. On the contrary, in every corner one was struck by neglect, dirt, grime; here a pane of glass was broken, there the plaster was coming off; in another place the boards were loose; in a third, a door gaped wide open. A large filthy puddle covered with a coating of rainbow-coloured slime stood in the middle of the main yard; farther on lay a heap of discarded bricks; scraps of mats and matting, boxes, and pieces of rope lay scattered here and there; shaggy, hungry-looking dogs wandered to and fro, too listless to bark; in a corner, under the fence, sat a grimy little boy of about four, with an enormous belly and dishevelled head, crying hopelessly, as if he had been forsaken by the whole world; close by a sow likewise besmeared in soot and surrounded by a medley of little suckling-pigs was devouring some cabbage stalks; some ragged clothes were stretched on a line— and such stuffiness and stench! In a word, just like a Russian factory— not like a French or a German one.

Nejdanov looked at Markelov.

"I have heard so much about Solomin's superior capabilities," he began, "that I confess all this disorder surprises me. I did not expect it."

"This is not disorder, but the usual Russian slovenliness," Markelov replied gloomily. "But all the same, they are turning over millions. Solomin has to adjust himself to the old ways, to practical things, and to the owner himself. Have you any idea what Falyeva is like?"

"Not in the least."

"He is the biggest skinflint in Moscow. A regular bourgeois."

At this moment Solomin entered the room. Nejdanov was just as disillusioned about him as he had been about the factory. At the first glance he gave one the impression of being a Finn or a Swede. He was tall, lean, broad-shouldered, with colourless eyebrows and eyelashes; had a long

sallow face, a short, rather broad nose, small greenish eyes, a placid expression, coarse thick lips, large teeth, and a divided chin covered with a suggestion of down. He was dressed like a mechanic or a stoker in an old pea-jacket with baggy pockets, with an oil-skin cap on his head, a woollen scarf round his neck, and tarred boots on his feet. He was accompanied by a man of about forty in a peasant coat, who had an extraordinarily lively gipsy-like face, coal- black piercing eyes, with which he scanned Nejdanov as soon as he entered the room. Markelov was already known to him. This was Pavel, Solomin's factotum.

Solomin approached the two visitors slowly and without a word, pressed the hand of each in turn in his own hard bony one. He opened a drawer, pulled out a sealed letter, which he handed to Pavel, also without a word, and the latter immediately left the room. Then he stretched himself, threw away his cap with one wave of the hand, sat down on a painted wooden stool and, pointing to a couch, begged Nejdanov and Markelov to be seated.

Markelov first introduced Nejdanov, whom Solomin again shook by the hand, then he went on to "business," mentioning Vassily Nikolaevitch's letter, which Nejdanov handed to Solomin. And while the latter was reading it carefully, his eyes moving from line to line, Nejdanov sat watching him. Solomin was near the window and the sun, already low in the horizon, was shining full on his tanned face covered with perspiration, on his fair hair covered with dust, making it sparkle like a mass of gold. His nostrils quivered and distended as he read, and his lips moved as though he were forming every word. He held the letter raised tightly in both hands, and when he had finished returned it to Nejdanov and began listening to Markelov again. The latter talked until he had exhausted himself.

"I am afraid," Solomin began (his hoarse voice, full of youth and strength, was pleasing to Nejdanov's ear), "it will be rather inconvenient to talk here. Why not go to your place? It is only a question of seven miles. You came in your carriage, did you not?"

"Yes."

"Well, I suppose you can make room for me. I shall have finished my work in about an hour, and will be quite free. We can talk things over thoroughly. You are also free, are you not?" he asked, turning to Nejdanov.

"Until the day after tomorrow."

"That's all right. We can stay the night at your place, Sergai Mihailovitch, I suppose?

"Of course you may!"

"Good. I shall be ready in a minute. I'll just make myself a little more presentable."

"And how are things at your factory?" Nejdanov asked significantly.

Solomin looked away.

"We can talk things over thoroughly," he remarked a second time. " Please excuse me a moment… I'll be back directly… . I've forgotten something."

He went out. Had he not already produced a good impression on Nejdanov, the latter would have thought that he was backing out, but such an idea did not occur to him.

An hour later, when from every story, every staircase and door of the enormous building, a noisy crowd of workpeople came streaming out, the carriage containing Markelov, Nejdanov, and Solomin drove out of the gates on to the road.

"Vassily Fedotitch! Is it to be done?" Pavel shouted after Solomin, whom he had accompanied to the gate.

"No, not now," Solomin replied. "He wanted to know about some night work," he explained, turning to his companions.

When they reached Borsionkov they had some supper, merely for the sake of politeness, and afterwards lighted cigars and began a discussion, one of those interminable, midnight Russian discussions which in degree and length are only peculiar to Russians and unequalled by people of any other nationality. During the discussion, too, Solomin did not come up to Nejdanov's expectation. He spoke little—so little that one might almost have said that he was quite silent. But he listened attentively, and whenever he made any remark or gave an opinion, did so briefly, seriously, showing a considerable amount of common- sense. Solomin did not believe that the Russian revolution was so near at hand, but not wishing to act as a wet blanket on others, he did not intrude his opinions or hinder others from making attempts. He looked on from a distance as it were, but was still a comrade by their side. He knew the St. Petersburg revolutionists and agreed with their ideas up to a certain point. He himself belonged to the people, and fully realised that the great bulk of them, without whom one can do nothing, were still quite indifferent, that they must first be prepared, by quite different means and for entirely different

ends than the upper classes. So he held aloof, not from a sense of superiority, but as an ordinary man with a few independent ideas, who did not wish to ruin himself or others in vain. But as for listening, there was no harm in that.

Solomin was the only son of a deacon and had five sisters, who were all married to priests or deacons. He was also destined for the church, but with his father's consent threw it up and began to study mathematics, as he had taken a special liking to mechanics. He entered a factory of which the owner was an Englishman, who got to love him like his own son. This man supplied him with the means of going to Manchester, where he stayed for two years, acquiring an excellent knowledge of the English language. With the Moscow merchant he had fallen in but a short time ago. He was exacting with his subordinates, a manner he had acquired in England, but they liked him nevertheless, and treated him as one of themselves. His father was very proud of him, and used to speak of him as a steady sort of man, but was very grieved that he did not marry and settle down.

During the discussion, as we have already said, Solomin sat silent the whole time; but when Markelov began enlarging upon the hopes they put on the factory workers, Solomin remarked, in his usual laconic way, that they must not depend too much on them, as factory workers in Russia were not what they were abroad. "They are an extremely mild set of people here."

"And what about the peasants?"

"The peasants? There are a good many sweaters and money-lenders among them now, and there are likely to be more in time. This kind only look to their own interests, and as for the others, they are as ignorant as sheep."

"Then where are we to turn to?" Solomin smiled.

"Seek and ye shall find."

There was a constant smile on his lips, but the smile was as full of meaning as the man himself. With Nejdanov he behaved in a very peculiar manner. He was attracted to the young student and felt an almost tender sympathy for him. At one part of the discussion, where Nejdanov broke out into a perfect torrent of words, Solomin got up quietly, moved across the room with long strides, and shut a window that was standing open just above Nejdanov's head.

"You might catch cold," he observed, in answer to the orator's look of amazement.

Nejdanov began to question him about his factory, asking if any co-operative experiments had been made, if anything had been done so that the workers might come in for a share of the profits.

"My dear fellow!" Solomin exclaimed, "I instituted a school and a tiny hospital, and even then the owner struggled like a bear!"

Solomin lost his temper once in real earnest on hearing of some legal injustice about the suppression of a workman's association. He banged his powerful fist on the table so that everything on it trembled, including a forty-pound weight, which happened to be lying near the ink pot.

When Markelov and Nejdanov began discussing ways and means of executing their plans, Solomin listened with respectful curiosity, but did not pronounce a single word. Their talk lasted until four o'clock in the morning, when they had touched upon almost everything under the sun. Markelov again spoke mysteriously of Kisliakov's untiring journeys and his letters, which were becoming more interesting than ever. He promised to show them to Nejdanov, saying that he would probably have to take them away with him, as they were rather lengthy and written in an illegible handwriting. He assured him that there was a great deal of learning in them and even poetry, not of the frivolous kind, but poetry with a socialistic tendency!

From Kisliakov, Markelov went on to the military, to adjutants, Germans, even got so far as his articles on the shortcomings of the artillery, whilst Nejdanov spoke about the antagonism between Heine and Borne, Proudhon, and realism in art. Solomin alone sat listening and reflecting, the smile never leaving his lips. Without having uttered a single word, he seemed to understand better than the others where the essential difficulty lay.

The hour struck four. Nejdanov and Markelov could scarcely stand on their legs from exhaustion, while Solomin was as fresh as could be. They parted for the night, having agreed to go to town the next day to see the merchant Golushkin, an Old Believer, who was said to be very zealous and promised proselytes.

Solomin doubted whether it was worth while going, but agreed to go in the end.

Chapter 17

MARKELOV'S guests were still asleep when a messenger with a letter came to him from his sister, Madame Sipiagina. In this letter Valentina Mihailovna spoke about various little domestic details, asked him to return a book he had borrowed, and added, by the way, in a postscript, the very "amusing" piece of news that his old flame Mariana was in love with the tutor Nejdanov and he with her. This was not merely gossip, but she, Valentina Mihailovna, had seen with her own eyes and heard with her own ears. Markelov's face grew blacker than night, but he did not utter a word. He ordered the book to be returned, and when he caught sight of Nejdanov coming downstairs, greeted him just as usual and did not even forget to give him the promised packet of Kisliakov's letters. He did not stay with him however, but went out to see to the farm.

Nejdanov returned to his own room and glanced through the letters. The young propagandist spoke mostly about himself, about his unsparing activity. According to him, during the last month, he had been in no less than eleven provinces, nine towns, twenty- nine villages, fifty-three hamlets,one farmhouse, and seven factories. Sixteen nights he had slept in hay-lofts, one in a stable, another even in a cow-shed (here he wrote, in parenthesis, that fleas did not worry him); he had wheedled himself into mud-huts, workmen's barracks, had preached, taught, distributed pamphlets, and collected information; some things he had made a note of on the spot; others he carried in his memory by the very latest method of mnemonics. He had written fourteen long letters, twenty-eight shorter ones, and eighteen notes, four of which were written in pencil, one in blood, and another in soot and water. All this he had managed to do because he had learned how to divide his time systematically, according to the examples set by men such as Quintin Johnson, Karrelius, Sverlitskov, and other writers and statisticians. Then he went on to talk of himself again, of his guiding star, saying how he had supplemented Fourier's passions by being the first to discover the "fundaments, the root

principle," and how he would not go out of this world without leaving some trace behind him; how he was filled with wonder that he, a youth of twenty-four, should have solved all the problems of life and science; that he would turn the whole of Russia up-side-down, that he would "shake her up!" "Dixi!!" he added at the end of the paragraph. This word "Dixi" appeared very frequently in Kisliakov's letters, and always with a double exclamation mark. In one of the letters there were some verses with a socialist tendency, written to a certain young lady, beginning with the words— "Love not me, but the idea!"

Nejdanov marvelled inwardly, not so much at Kisliakov's conceit, as at Markelov's honest simplicity. "Bother aestheticism! Mr. Kisliakov may be even useful," he thought to himself instantly.

The three friends gathered together for tea in the dining-room, but last night's conversation was not renewed between them. Not one of them wished to talk, but Solomin was the only one who sat silent peacefully. Both Nejdanov and Markelov seemed inwardly agitated. After tea they set out for the town. Markelov's old servant, who was sitting on the doorstep, accompanied his former master with his habitual dejected glance.

The merchant Golushkin, with whom it was necessary to acquaint Nejdanov, was the son of a wealthy merchant in drugs, an Old Believer, of the Thedosian sect. He had not increased the fortune left to him by his father, being, as the saying goes, a joneur, an Epicurean in the Russian fashion, with absolutely no business abilities. He was a man of forty, rather stout and ugly, pock- marked, with small eyes like a pig's. He spoke hurriedly, swallowing his words as it were, gesticulated with his hands, threw his legs about and went into roars of laughter at everything. On the whole, he gave one the impression of being a stupid, spoiled, conceited bounder. He considered himself a man of culture because he dressed in the German fashion, kept an open house (though it was not overly clean), frequented the theatre, and had many protegees among variety actresses, with whom he conversed in some extraordinary jargon meant to be French. His principal passion was a thirst for popularity. "Let the name of Golushkin thunder through the world! As once Suvorov or Potyomkin, then why not now Kapiton Golushkin?" It was this very passion, conquering even his innate meanness, which had thrown him, as he himself expressed it not without a touch of pride, "into the arms of the opposition" (formerly he used to say "position," but had learned better since then) and brought him in contact with the nihilists. He gave expression to the most extreme views, scoffed at his own

Old Believer's faith, ate meat in Lent, played cards, and drank champagne like water. He never got into difficulties, because he said, "Wherever necessary, I have bribed the authorities. All holes are stitched up, all mouths are closed, all ears are stopped."

He was a widower without children. His sister's sons fawned around him continuously, but he called them a lot of ignorant louts, barbarians, and would hardly look at them. He lived in a large, stone house, kept in rather a slovenly manner. Some of the rooms were furnished with foreign furniture, others contained nothing but a few painted wooden chairs and a couch covered with American cloth. There were pictures everywhere of an indifferent variety. Fiery landscapes, purple seascapes, fat naked women with pink-coloured knees and elbows, and "The Kiss" by Moller. In spite of the fact that Golushkin had no family, there were a great many menials and hangers-on collected under his roof. He did not receive them from any feeling of generosity, but simply from a desire to be popular and to have someone at his beck and call. "My clients," he used to say when he wished to throw dust in one's eyes. He read very little, but had an excellent memory for learned expressions.

The young people found Golushkin in his study, where he was sitting comfortably wrapped up in a long dressing-gown, with a cigar between his lips, pretending to be reading a newspaper. On their entrance he jumped up, rushed up to them, went red in the face, shouted for some refreshments to be brought quickly, asked them some questions, laughed for no reason in particular, and all this in one breath. He knew Markelov and Solomin, but had not yet met Nejdanov. On hearing that the latter was a student, he broke into another laugh, pressed his hand a second time, exclaiming:

"Splendid! Splendid! We are gathering forces! Learning is light, ignorance is darkness—I had a wretched education myself, but I understand things; that's how I've got on!"

It seemed to Nejdanov that Golushkin was shy and embarrassed—and indeed it really was so. "Take care, brother Kapiton! Mind what you are about!" was his first thought on meeting a new person. He soon recovered himself however, and began in the same hurried, lisping, confused tone of voice, talking about Vassily Nikolaevitch, about his temperament, about the necessity of pro- pa-ganda (he knew this word quite well, but articulated it slowly), saying that he, Golushkin, had discovered a certain promising young chap, that the time had now come, that the time was now ripe for … for the lancet (at this word he glanced

at Markelov, but the latter did not stir). He then turned to Nejdanov and began speaking of himself in no less glowing terms than the distinguished correspondent Kisliakov, saying that he had long ago ceased being a fool, that he fully recognised the rights of the proletariat (he remembered this word splendidly), that although he had actually given up commerce and taken to banking instead with a view to increasing his capital, yet only so that this same capital could at any given moment be called upon for the use … for the use of the cause, that is to say, for the use of the people, and that he, Golushkin, in reality, despised wealth! At this point a servant entered with some refreshment; Golushkin cleared his throat significantly, asked if they would not partake of something, and was the first to gulp down a glass of strong pepper-brandy. The guests partook of refreshments. Golushkin thrust huge pieces of caviar into his mouth and drank incessantly, saying every now and again:

"Come, gentlemen, come, some splendid Macon, please!" Turning to Nejdanov, he began asking him where he had come from, where he was staying and for how long, and on hearing that he was staying at Sipiagin's, exclaimed: "I know this gentleman! Nothing in him whatever!" and instantly began abusing all the landowners in the province because, he said, not only were they void of public spirit, but they did not even understand their own interests.

But, strange to say, in spite of his being so abusive, his eyes wandered about uneasily. Nejdanov could not make him out at all, and wondered what possible use he could be to them. Solomin was silent as usual and Markelov wore such a gloomy expression that Nejdanov could not help asking what was the matter with him. Markelov declared that it was nothing in a tone in which people commonly let you understand that there is something wrong, but that it does not concern you. Golushkin again started abusing someone or other and then went on to praise the new generation. "Such clever chaps they are nowadays! Clever chaps!" Solomin interrupted him by asking about the hopeful young man whom he had mentioned and where be had discovered him. Golushkin laughed, repeating once or twice, " Just wait, you will see! You will see!" and began questioning him about his factory and its "rogue" of an owner, to which Solomin replied in monosyllables. Then Golushkin poured them all champagne, and bending over to Nejdanov, whispered in his ear, "To the republic!" and drank off his glass at a gulp. Nejdanov merely put his lips to the glass; Solomin said that he did not take wine in the morning; and Markelov angrily and resolutely drank his glass to the last drop. He was torn by impatience. "Here we are coolly wasting our time

and not tackling the real matter in hand." He struck a blow on the table, exclaiming severely, "Gentlemen!" and began to speak.

But at this moment there entered a sleek, consumptive-looking man with a long neck, in a merchant's coat of nankeen, and arms outstretched like a bird. He bowed to the whole company and, approaching Golushkin, communicated something to him in a whisper.

"In a minute! In a minute!" the latter exclaimed, hurriedly. "Gentlemen," he added, "I must ask you to excuse me. Vasia, my clerk, has just told me of such a little piece of news " (Golushkin expressed himself thus purposely by way of a joke) "which absolutely necessitates my leaving you for awhile. But I hope, gentlemen, that you will come and have dinner with me at three o'clock. Then we shall be more free!"

Neither Solomin nor Nejdanov knew what to say, but Markelov replied instantly, with that same severity in his face and voice:

"Of course we will come."

"Thanks very much," Golushkin said hastily, and bending down to Markelov, added, "I will give a thousand roubles for the cause in any case… . Don't be afraid of that!"

And so saying, he waved his right hand three times, with the thumb and little finger sticking out. "You may rely on me!" he added.

He accompanied his guests to the door, shouting, "I shall expect you at three!"

"Very well," Markelov was the only one to reply.

"Gentlemen!" Solomin exclaimed as soon as they found themselves in the street, "I am going to take a cab and go straight back to the factory. What can we do here until dinnertime? A sheer waste of time, kicking our heels about, and I am afraid our worthy merchant is like the well-known goat, neither good for milk nor for wool."

"The wool is there right enough," Markelov observed gloomily. "He promised to give us some money. Don't you like him? Unfortunately, we can't pick and choose. People do not run after us exactly."

"I am not fastidious," Solomin said calmly. "I merely thought that my presence would not do much good. However," he added, glancing at Nejdanov with a smile, "I will stay if you like. Even death is bearable in good company."

Markelov raised his head.

"Supposing we go into the public garden. The weather is lovely. We can sit and look at the people."

"Come along."

They moved on; Markelov and Solomin in front, Nejdanov in the rear.

Chapter 18

STRANGE was the state of Nejdanov's soul. In the last two days so many new sensations, new faces… . For the first time in his life he had come in close contact with a girl whom in all probability he loved. He was present at the beginning of the movement for which in all probability he was to devote his whole life… . Well? Was he glad? No… . Was he wavering? Was he afraid? Confused? Oh, certainly not! Did he at any rate feel that straining of the whole being, that longing to be among the first ranks, which is always inspired by the first approach of the battle? Again, No. Did he really believe in this cause? Did he believe in his love? "Oh, cursed aesthetic! Sceptic!" his lips murmured inaudibly. Why this weariness, this disinclination to speak, unless it be shouting or raving? What is this inner voice that he wishes to drown by his shrieking? But Mariana, this delightful, faithful comrade, this pure, passionate soul, this wonderful girl, does she not love him indeed? And these two beings in front of him, this Markelov and Solomin, whom he as yet knew but little, but to whom he was attracted so much, were they not excellent types of the Russian people—of Russian life—and was it not a happiness in itself to be closely connected with them? Then why this vague, uneasy, gnawing sensation? Why this sadness? If you're such a melancholy dreamer, his lips murmured again, what sort of a revolutionist will you make? You ought to write verses, languish, nurse your own insignificant thoughts and sensations, amuse yourself with psychological fancies and subtleties of all sorts, but don't at any rate mistake your sickly, nervous irritability and caprices for the manly wrath, the honest anger, of a man of convictions! 0h Hamlet! Hamlet! Thou Prince of Denmark! How escape from the shadow of thy spirit? How cease to imitate thee in everything, even to revelling shamelessly in one's own self-depreciation? Just then, as the echo of his own thoughts, he heard a familiar squeaky voice exclaim, "Alexai! Alexai! Hamlet of Russia! Is it you I behold?" and raising his eyes, to his great astonishment, saw Paklin standing before him! Paklin, in Arcadian attire, consisting of a summer suit of flesh-

colour, without a tie, a large straw hat, trimmed with pale blue ribbon, pushed to the back of his head, and patent shoes!

He limped up to Nejdanov quickly and seized his hand.

"In the first place," he began, "although we are in the public garden, we must for the sake of old times embrace and kiss… One! two! three! Secondly, I must tell you, that had I not run across you to-day you would most certainly have seen me tomorrow. I know where you live and have come to this town expressly to see you … how and why I will tell you later. Thirdly, introduce me to your friends. Tell me briefly who they are, and tell them who I am, and then let us proceed to enjoy ourselves!

Nejdanov responded to his friend's request, introduced them to each other, explaining who each was, where he lived, his profession, and so on.

"Splendid!" Paklin exclaimed. "And now let me lead you all far from the crowd, though there is not much of it here, certainly, to a secluded seat, where I sit in hours of contemplation enjoying nature. We will get a magnificent view of the governor's house, two striped sentry boxes, three gendarmes, and not a single dog! Don't be too much surprised at the volubility of my remarks with which I am trying so hard to amuse you. According to my friends, I am the representative of Russian wit … probably that is why I am lame."

Paklin conducted the friends to the "secluded seat" and made them sit down, after having first got rid of two beggar women installed on it. Then the young people proceeded to "exchange ideas," a rather dull occupation mostly, particularly at the beginning, and a fruitless one generally.

"Stop a moment!" Paklin exclaimed, turning to Nejdanov, "I must first tell you why I've come here. You know that I usually take my sister away somewhere every summer, and when I heard that you were coming to this neighbourhood I remembered there were two wonderful creatures living in this very town, husband and wife, distant relations of ours … on our mother's side. My father came from the lower middle class and my mother was of noble blood." (Nejdanov knew this, but Paklin mentioned the fact for the benefit of the others.) "These people have for a long time been asking us to come and see them. Why not? I thought. It's just what I want. They're the kindest creatures and it will do my sister no end of good. What could be better? And so here we are. And really I can't tell you how jolly it is for us here! They're such dears! Such original

types! You must certainly get to know them! What are you doing here? Where are you going to dine? And why did you come here of all places?"

"We are going to dine with a certain Golushkin—a merchant here," Nejdanov replied.

"At what time? "

"At three o'clock."

"Are you going to see him on account… on account—"

Paklin looked at Solomin who was smiling and at Markelov who sat enveloped in his gloom.

"Come, Aliosha, tell them—make some sort of Masonic sign . . tell them not to be on ceremony with me … I am one of you—of your party."

"Golushkin is also one of us," Nejdanov observed.

"Why, that's splendid! It is still a long way off from three o'clock. Suppose we go and see my relatives!"

What an idea! How can…

"Don't be alarmed, I take all the responsibility upon myself. Imagine, it's an oasis! Neither politics, literature, nor anything modern ever penetrates there. The little house is such a squat one, such as one rarely sees nowadays; the very smell in it is antique; the people antique, the air antique… whatever you touch is antique, Catherine II. powder, crinolines, eighteenth century! And the host and hostess … imagine a husband and wife both very old, of the same age, without a wrinkle, chubby, round, neat little people, just like two poll-parrots; and kind to stupidity, to saintliness, there is no end to their kindness! I am told that excessive kindness is often a sign of moral weakness… . I cannot enter into these subtleties, but I know that my dear old people are goodness itself. They never had any children, the blessed ones! That is what they call them here in the town; blessed ones! They both dress alike, in a sort of loose striped gown, of such good material, also a rarity, not to be found nowadays. They are exactly like one another, except that one wears a mob-cap, the other a skull-cap, which is trimmed with the same kind of frill, only without ribbons. If it were not for these ribbons, you would not know one from the other, as the husband is clean-shaven. One is called Fomishka, the other Fimishka. I tell you one ought to pay to go and look at them! They love one another in the most impossible way; and if you ever go to see them, they welcome you with open arms. And so gracious; they will show off all their little parlour tricks to amuse you. But there is only one thing they can't stand, and that is smoking, not because they are

nonconformists, but because it doesn't agree with them… . Of course, nobody smoked in their time. However, to make up for that, they don't keep canaries— this bird was also very little known in their day. I'm sure you'll agree that that's a comfort at any rate! Well? Will you come?"

"I really don't know," Nejdanov began.

"Wait a moment! I forgot to tell you; their voices, too, are exactly alike; close your eyes and you can hardly tell which is speaking. Fomishka, perhaps, speaks just a little more expressively. You are about to enter on a great undertaking, my dear friends; may be on a terrible conflict… Why not, before plunging into the stormy deep, take a dip in to—"

"Stagnant water," Markelov put in.

"Stagnant if you like, but not putrid. There are ponds in the steppes which never get putrid, although there is no stream flowing through them, because they have springs at the bottom. My old people have their springs flowing in the depths of their hearts, as pure and as fresh as can be. The question is this: do you want to see how people lived a hundred or a hundred and fifty years ago? If so, then make haste and follow me. Or soon the day, the hour will come—it's bound to be the same hour for them both- -when my little parrots will be thrown off their little perches— and everything antique will end with them. The squat little house will tumble down and the place where it stood will be overgrown with that which, according to my grandmother, always grows over the spot where man's handiwork has been—that is, nettles, burdock, thistles, wormwood, and dock leaves. The very street will cease to be—other people will come and never will they see anything like it again, never, through all the long ages!"

"Well," Nejdanov exclaimed, "let us go at once!"

"With the greatest of pleasure," Solomin added. "That sort of thing is not in my line, still it will be interesting, and if Mr. Paklin really thinks that we shall not be putting anyone out by our visit … then … why not—"

"You may be at ease on that score!" Paklin exclaimed in his turn. "They will be delighted to see you—and nothing more. You need not be on ceremony. I told you—they were blessed ones. We will get them to sing to us! Will you come too, Mr. Markelov?"

Markelov shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"You can hardly leave me here alone! We may as well go, I suppose." The young people rose from the seat.

"What a forbidding individual that is you have with you," Paklin whispered to Nejdanov, indicating Markelov. "The very image of John the Baptist eating locusts … only locusts, without the honey! But the other is splendid!" he added, with a nod of the head in Solomin's direction. "What a delightful smile he has! I've noticed that people smile like that only when they are far above others, but without knowing it themselves."

"Are there really such people? " Nejdanov asked.

"They are scarce, but there are," Paklin replied.

Chapter 19

FOMISHKA and Fimishka, otherwise Foma Lavrentievitch and Efimia Pavlovna Subotchev, belonged to one of the oldest and purest branches of the Russian nobility, and were considered to be the oldest inhabitants in the town of S. They married when very young and settled, a long time ago, in the little wooden ancestral house at the very end of the town. Time seemed to have stood still for them, and nothing "modern" ever crossed the boundaries of their "oasis." Their means were not great, but their peasants supplied them several times a year with all the live stock and provisions they needed, just as in the days of serfdom, and their bailiff appeared once a year with the rents and a couple of woodcocks, supposed to have been shot in the master's forests, of which, in reality, not a trace remained. They regaled him with tea at the drawing-room door, made him a present of a sheep-skin cap, a pair of green leather mittens, and sent him away with a blessing.

The Subotchevs' house was filled with domestics and menials just as in days gone by. The old man-servant Kalliopitch, clad in a jacket of extraordinarily stout cloth with a stand-up collar and small steel buttons, announced, in a sing-song voice, "Dinner is on the table," and stood dozing behind his mistress's chair as in days of old. The sideboard was under his charge, and so were all the groceries and pickles. To the question, had he not heard of the emancipation, he invariably replied: "How can one take notice of every idle piece of gossip? To be sure the Turks were emancipated, but such a dreadful thing had not happened to him, thank the Lord!" A girl, Pufka, was kept in the house for entertainment, and the old nurse Vassilievna used to come in during dinner with a dark kerchief on her head, and would relate all the news in her deep voice—about Napoleon, about the war of 1812, about Antichrist and white niggers—or else, her chin propped on her hand, with a most woeful expression on her face, she would tell of a dream she had had, explaining what it meant, or perhaps how she had last read her fortune at cards. The Subotchevs' house was different from all other houses in the town. It was

built entirely of oak, with perfectly square windows, the double casements for winter use were never removed all the year round. It contained numerous little ante-rooms, garrets, closets, and box-rooms, little landings with balustrades, little statues on carved wooden pillars, and all kinds of back passages and sculleries. There was a hedge right in front and a garden at the back, in which there was a perfect nest of out-buildings: store rooms and cold-store rooms, barns, cellars and ice-cellars; not that there were many goods stored in them—some of them, in fact, were in an extremely delapidated condition—but they had been there in olden days and were consequently allowed to remain.

The Subotchevs had only two ancient shaggy saddle horses, one of which, called the Immovable, had turned grey from old age. They were harnessed several times a month to an extraordinary carriage, known to the whole town, which bore a faint resemblance to a terrestrial globe with a quarter of it cut away in front, and was upholstered inside with some foreign, yellowish stuff, covered with a pattern of huge dots, looking for all the world like warts. The last yard of this stuff must have been woven in Utrecht or Lyons in the time of the Empress Elisabeth! The Subotchev's coachman, too, was old—an ancient, ancient old man with a constant smell of tar and cart-oil about him. His beard began just below the eyes, while the eyebrows fell in little cascades to meet it. He was called Perfishka, and was extremely slow in his movements. It took him at least five minutes to take a pinch of snuff, two minutes to fasten the whip in his girdle, and two whole hours to harness the Immovable alone. If when out driving in their carriage the Subotchevs were ever compelled to go the least bit up or down hill, they would become quite terrified, would cling to the straps, and both cry aloud, "Oh Lord… give .. the horses … the horses … the strength of Samson … and make us … as light as a feather!"

The Subotchevs were regarded by everyone in the town as very eccentric, almost mad, and indeed they too felt that they were not in keeping with modern times. This, however, did not grieve them very much, and they quietly continued to follow the manner of life in which they had been born and bred and married. One custom of that time, however, did not cling to them; from their earliest childhood they had never punished any of their servants. If one of them turned out to be a thief or a drunkard, then they bore with him for a long time, as one bears with bad weather, and when their patience was quite exhausted they would get rid of him by passing him on to someone else. "Let others bear with him a little," they would say. But any such misfortune rarely happened to

them, so rarely that it became an epoch in their lives. They would say, for instance, "Oh, it was long ago; it happened when we had that impudent Aldoshka with us," or "When grandfather's fur cap with the fox's tail was stolen!" Such caps were still to be found at the Subotchevs'. Another distinguishing characteristic of the old world was missing in them; neither Fomishka nor Fimishka were very religious. Fomishka was even a follower of Voltaire, while Fimishka had a mortal dread of the clergy and believed them to be possessed of the evil eye. "As soon as a priest comes into my house the cream turns sour!" she used to say. They rarely went to church and fasted in the Catholic fashion, that is, ate eggs, butter, and milk. This was known in the town and did not, of course, add to their reputation. But their kindness conquered everybody; and although the Subotchevs were laughed at and called cranks and blessed ones, still they were respected by everyone. No one cared to visit them, however, but they were little concerned about this, too. They were never dull when in each other's company, were never apart, and never desired any other society.

Neither Fomishka nor Fimishka had ever been ill, and if one or the other ever felt the slightest indisposition they would both drink some concoction made of lime-flower, rub warm oil on their stomachs, or drop hot candle grease on the soles of their feet and the little ailment would soon pass over. They spent their days exactly alike. They got up late, drank chocolate in tiny cups shaped like small mortars (tea, they declared, came into fashion after their time), and sat opposite one another chatting (they were never at a loss for a subject of conversation!), or read out of "Pleasant Recreations", "The World's Mirror", or "Amides", or turned over the leaves of an old album, bound in red morocco, with gilt edges. This album had once belonged, as the inscription showed, to a certain Madame Barbe de Kabyline. How and why it had come into their possession they did not know. It contained several French and a great many Russian poems and prose extracts, of which the following reflections on Cicero form a fair example—"The disposition in which Cicero undertook the office of quaestor may be gathered from the following: Calling upon the gods to testify to the purity of his sentiments in every rank with which he had hitherto been honoured, he considered himself bound by the most sacred bonds to the fulfilment of this one, and denied himself the indulgence, not only of such pleasures as are forbidden by law, but refrained even from such light amusements which are considered indispensable by all." Below was written, "Composed in Siberia

in hunger and cold." An equally good specimen was a poem entitled" Tirsis," which ran like this—

The universe is steeped in calm, The delightful sparkling dew Soothing nature like a balm Gives to her, her life anew. Tersis alone with aching heart, Is torn by sadness and dismay, When dear Aneta doth depart What is there to make him gay?

And the impromptu composition of a certain captain who had visited the place in the year 1790, dated May 6th—

N'er shall I forget thee, Village that to love I've grown, But I ever shall regret thee And the hours so quickly flown, Hours which I was honoured in Spending with your owner's kin, The five dearest days of my life will hold Passed amongst most worthy people, Merry ladies, young and old, And other interesting people.

On the last page of the album, instead of verses, there were various recipes for remedies against stomach troubles, spasms, and worms. The Subotchevs dined exactly at twelve o'clock and only ate old-fashioned dishes: curd fritters, pickled cabbage, soups, fruit jellies, minced chicken with saffron, stews, custards, and honey. They took an after-dinner nap for an hour, not longer, and on waking up would sit opposite one another again, drinking bilberry wine or an effervescent drink called "forty-minds," which nearly always squirted out of the bottle, affording them great amusement, much to the disgust of Kalliopitch, who had to wipe up the mess afterwards. He grumbled at the cook and housekeeper as if they had invented this dreadful drink on purpose. "What pleasure does it give one?" he asked; "it only spoils the furniture." Then the old people again read something, or got the dwarf Pufka to entertain them, or sang old- fashioned duets. Their voices were exactly alike, rather high-pitched, not very strong or steady, and somewhat husky, especially after their nap, but not without a certain amount of charm. Or, if need be, they played at cards, always the same old games— cribbage, ecarte, or double-dummy whist. Then the samovar made its appearance. The only concession they made to the spirit of the age was to drink tea in the evening, though they always considered it an indulgence, and were convinced that the nation was deteriorating, owing to the use of this "Chinese herb." On the whole, they refrained from criticising modern times or from exulting their own. They had lived like this all their lives, but that others might live in a different and even better way they were quite willing to admit, so long as they were not compelled to conform to it. At seven o'clock Kalliopitch produced the inevitable supper of cold

hash, and at nine the high striped feather-bed received their rotund little bodies in its soft embrace, and a calm, untroubled sleep soon descended upon their eyelids. Everything in the little house became hushed; the little lamp before the icon glowed and glimmered, the funny innocent little pair slept the sound sleep of the just, amidst the fragrant scent of musk and the chirping of the cricket.

To these two odd little people, or poll-parrots as Paklin called them, who were taking care of his sister, he now conducted his friends.

Paklin's sister was a clever girl with a fairly attractive face. She had wonderfully beautiful eyes, but her unfortunate deformity had completely broken her spirit, deprived her of self- confidence, joyousness, made her mistrustful and even spiteful. She had been given the unfortunate name of Snandulia, and to Paklin's request that she should be rechristened Sophia, she replied that it was just as it should be; a hunchback ought to be called Snandulia; so she stuck to her strange name. She was an excellent musician and played the piano very well. "Thanks to my long fingers," she would say, not without a touch of bitterness. "Hunchbacks always have fingers like that."

The visitors came upon Fomishka and Fimishka at the very minute when they had awakened from their afternoon nap and were drinking bilberry wine.

"We are going into the eighteenth century!" Paklin exclaimed as they crossed the threshold of the Subotchevs' house.

And really they were confronted by the eighteenth century in the very hall, with its low bluish screens, ornamented with black silhouettes cut out of paper, of powdered ladies and gentlemen. Silhouettes, first introduced by Lavater, were much in vogue in the eighties of last century.

The sudden appearance of such a large number of guests—four all at once—produced quite a sensation in the usually quiet house. A hurried sound of feet, both shod and unshod, was heard, several women thrust their heads through the door and instantly drew them back again, someone was pushed, another groaned, a third giggled, someone whispered excitedly, "Be quiet, do!"

At last Kalliopitch made his appearance in his old coat, and opening the drawing-room door announced in a loud voice:

"Sila Samsonitch with some other gentlemen, sir!"

The Subotchevs were less disturbed than their servants, although the eruption of four full-sized men into their drawing-room, spacious

though it was, did in fact surprise them somewhat. But Paklin soon reassured them, introducing Nejdanov, Solomin, and Markelov in turn, as good quiet people, not "governmental."

Fomishka and Fimishka had a horror of governmental, that is to say, official people.

Snandulia, who appeared at her brother's request, was far more disturbed and agitated than the old couple.

They asked, both together and in exactly the same words, if their guests would be pleased to partake of some tea, chocolate, or an effervescent drink with jam, but learning that they did not require anything, having just lunched with the merchant Golushkin and that they were returning there to dinner, they ceased pressing them, and, folding their arms in exactly the same manner across their stomachs, they entered into conversation. It was a little slow at first, but soon grew livelier.

Paklin amused them very much by relating the well known Gogol anecdote about a superintendent of police, who managed to push his way into a church already so packed with people that a pin could scarcely drop, and about a pie which turned out to be no other than this same superintendent himself. The old people laughed till the tears rolled down their cheeks. They had exactly the same shrill laugh and both went red in the face from the effort. Paklin noticed that people of the Subotchev type usually went into fits of laughter over quotations from Gogol, but as his object at the present moment was not so much in amusing them as in showing them off to his friends, he changed his tactics and soon managed to put them in an excellent humour.

Fomishka produced a very ancient carved wooden snuff-box and showed it to the visitors with great pride. At one time one could have discerned about thirty-six little human figures in various attitudes carved on its lid, but they were so erased as to be scarcely visible now. Fomishka, however, still saw them and could even count them. He would point to one and say, " Just look! this one is staring out of the window… . He has thrust his head out!" but the place indicated by his fat little finger with the nail raised was just as smooth as the rest of the box. He then turned their attention to an oil painting hanging on the wall just above his head. It represented a hunter in profile, galloping at full speed on a bay horse, also in profile, over a snow plain. The hunter was clad in a tall white sheepskin hat with a pale blue point, a tunic of camel's hair edged with velvet, and a girdle wrought in gold. A glove embroidered in silk was gracefully tucked into the girdle, and a dagger chased in black

and silver hung at the side. In one hand the plump, youthful hunter carried an enormous horn, ornamented with red tassels, and the reins and whip in the other. The horse's four legs were all suspended in the air, and on every one of them the artist had carefully painted a horseshoe and even indicated the nails. "Look," Fomishka observed, pointing with the same fat little finger to four semi-circular spots on the white ground, close to the horse's legs, "he has even put the snow prints in!" Why there were only four of these prints and not any to be seen further back, on this point Fomishka was silent.

"This was I!" he added after a pause, with a modest smile.

"Really! " Nejdanov exclaimed, "were you ever a hunting man?"

"Yes. I was for a time. Once the horse threw me at full gallop and I injured my kurpey. Fimishka got frightened and forbade me; so I have given it up since then."

"What did you injure?" Nejdanov asked.

"My kurpey," Fomishka repeated, lowering his voice.

The visitors looked at one another. No one knew what kurpey meant; at least, Markelov knew that the tassel on a Cossack or Circassian cap was called a kurpey, but then how could Fomishka have injured that? But no one dared to question him further.

"Well, now that you have shown off," Fimishka remarked suddenly, "I will show off too." And going up to a small bonheur du jour, as they used to call an old-fashioned bureau, on tiny, crooked legs, with a round lid which fitted into the back of it somewhere when opened, she took out a miniature in water colour, in an oval bronze frame, of a perfectly naked little child of four years old with a quiver over her shoulders fastened across the chest with pale blue ribbons, trying the points of the arrows with the tip of her little finger. The child was all smiles and curls and had a slight squint.

"And that was I," she said.

"Really?

"Yes, as a child. When my father was alive a Frenchman used to come and see him, such a nice Frenchman too! He painted that for my father's birthday. Such a nice man! He used to come and see us often. He would come in, make such a pretty courtesy and kiss your hand, and when going away would kiss the tips of his own fingers so prettily, and bow to the right, to the left, backwards and forwards! He was such a nice Frenchman!"

The guests praised his work; Paklin even declared that he saw a certain likeness.

Here Fomishka began to express his views on the modern French, saying that they had become very wicked nowadays!

"What makes you think so, Foma Lavrentievitch?"

"Look at the awful names they give themselves nowadays!"

"What, for instance?"

"Nogent Saint Lorraine, for instance! A regular brigand's name!"

Fomishka asked incidentally who reigned in Paris now, and when told that it was Napoleon, was surprised and pained at the information.

"How? … Such an old man—" he began and stopped, looking round in confusion.

Fomishka had but a poor knowledge of French, and read Voltaire in translation; he always kept a translated manuscript of "Candide" in the bible box at the head of his bed. He used to come out with expressions like: "This, my dear, is Jausse parquet," meaning suspicious, untrue. He was very much laughed at for this, until a certain learned Frenchman told him that it was an old parliamentary expression employed in his country until the year 1789.

As the conversation turned upon France and the French, Fimishka resolved to ask something that had been very much on her mind. She first thought of addressing herself to Markelov, but he looked too forbidding, so she turned to Solomin, but no! He seemed to her such a plain sort of person, not likely to know French at all, so she turned to Nejdanov.

"I should like to ask you something, if I may," she began; "excuse me, my kinsman Sila Samsonitch makes fun of me and my woman's ignorance."

What is it? "

"Supposing one wants to ask in French, 'What is it?' must one say 'Kese-kese-kese-la?'"

"Yes."

"And can one also say 'Kese-kese-la?'

"Yes."

"And simply 'Kese-la?'"

"Yes, that's right."

"And does it mean the same thing?"

"Yes, it does."

Fimishka thought awhile, then threw up her arms.

"Well, Silushka," she exclaimed; "I am wrong and you are right. But these Frenchmen … How smart they are!"

Paklin began begging the old people to sing them some ballad. They were both surprised and amused at the idea, but consented readily on condition that Snandulia accompanied them on the harpsichord. In a corner of the room there stood a little spinet, which not one of them had noticed before. Snandulia sat down to it and struck several chords. Nejdanov had never heard such sour, toneless, tingling, jangling notes, but the old people promptly struck up the ballad, "Was it to Mourn."

Fomisha began-

"In love God gave a heart Of burning passion to inspire That loving heart with warm desire." "But there is agony in bliss"

Fimishka chimed in.

"And passion free from pain there is, Ah! where, where? tell me, tell me this,"

"Ah! where, where? Tell me, tell me this,"

Fomisha put in.

"Ah! where, where? tell me, tell me this,"

Fimishka repeated.

"Nowhere in all the world, nowhere, Love bringeth grief and black despair,"

they sang together,

"And that, love's gift is everywhere,"

Fomisha sang out alone.

"Bravo!" Paklin exclaimed. "We have had the first verse, now please sing us the second."

"With the greatest of pleasure," Fomishka said, "but what about the trill, Snandulia Samsonovna? After my verse there must be a trill."

"Very well, I will play your trill," Snandulia replied. Fomishka began again-

"Has ever lover loved true And kept his heart from grief and rue? He loveth but to weep anew"

and then Fimishka-

"Yea—hearts that love at last are riven As ships that hopelessly have striven For life. To what end were they given?"

"To what end were they given?"

Fomishka warbled out and waited for Snandulia to play the trill.

"To what end were they given?"

he repeated, and then they struck up together-

"Then take, 0h God, the heart away, Away, away, take hearts away, Away, away, away today."

"Bravo! Bravo!" the company exclaimed, all with exception of Markelov.

"I wonder they don't feel like clowns?" Nejdanov thought. "Perhaps they do, who knows? They no doubt think there is no harm in it and may be even amusing to some people. If one looks at it in that light, they are quite right! A thousand times right!"

Under the influence of these reflections he began paying compliments to the host and hostess, which they acknowledged with a courtesy, performed while sitting in their chairs. At this moment Pufka the dwarf and Nurse Vassilievna made their appearance from the adjoining room (a bedroom or perhaps the maids' room) from whence a great bustle and whispering had been going on for some time. Pufka began squealing and making hideous grimaces, while the nurse first quietened her, then egged her on.

Solomin's habitual smile became even broader, while Markelov, who had been for some time showing signs of impatience, suddenly turned to Fomishka:

"I did not expect that you," he began in his severe manner, "with your enlightened mind—I've heard that you are a follower of Voltaire—could be amused with what ought to be an object for compassion—with deformity!" Here he remembered Paklin's sister and could have bitten his tongue off.

Fomishka went red in the face and muttered: "You see it is not my fault … she herself—"

Pufka simply flew at Markelov.

"How dare you insult our masters?" she screamed out in her lisping voice. "What is it to you that they took me in, brought me up, and gave me meat and drink? Can't you bear to see another's good fortune, eh? Who asked you to come here? You fusty, musty, black-faced villain with

a moustache like a beetle's!" Here Pufka indicated with her thick short fingers what his moustache was like; while Nurse Vassilievna's toothless mouth was convulsed with laughter, re-echoed in the adjoining room.

"I am not in a position to judge you," Markelov went on. "To protect the homeless and deformed is a very praiseworthy work, but I must say that to live in ease and luxury, even though without injury to others, not lifting a finger to help a fellow- creature, does not require a great deal of goodness. I, for one, do not attach much importance to that sort of virtue!"

Here Pufka gave forth a deafening howl. She did not understand a word of what Markelov had said, but she felt that the "black one" was scolding, and how dared he! Vassilievna also muttered something, while Fomishka folded his hands across his breast and turned to his wife. "Fimishka, my darling," he began, almost in tears; "do you hear what the gentleman is saying? We are both wicked sinners, Pharisees… . We are living on the fat of the land, oh! oh! oh! We ought to be turned out into the street … with a broom in our hands to work for our living! Oh! oh!"

At these mournful words Pufka howled louder than ever, while Fimishka screwed up her eyes, opened her lips, drew in a deep breath, ready to retaliate, to speak.

God knows how it would have ended had not Paklin intervened.

"What is the matter?" he began, gesticulating with his hands and laughing loudly. "I wonder you are not ashamed of yourselves! Mr. Markelov only meant it as a joke. He has such a solemn face that it sounded a little severe and you took him seriously! Calm yourself! Efimia Pavlovna, darling, we are just going, won't you tell us our fortunes at cards? You are such a good hand at it. Snandulia, do get the cards, please!

Fimishka glanced at her husband, who seemed completely reassured, so she too quieted down.

"I have quite forgotten how to tell fortunes, my dear. It is such a long time since I held the cards in my hand."

But quite of her own accord she took an extraordinary, ancient pack of cards out of Snandalia's hand.

"Whose fortune shall I tell? "

"Why everybody's, of course!" Paklin exclaimed. "What a dear old thing … … … You can do what you like with her," he thought. "Tell us

all our fortunes, granny dear," he said aloud. "Tell us our fates, our characters, our futures, everything!"

She began shuffling the cards, but threw them down suddenly.

"I don't need cards!" she exclaimed. "I know all your characters without that, and as the character, so is the fate. This one," she said, pointing to Solomin, "is a cool, steady sort of man. That one," she said, pointing threateningly at Markelov, "is a fiery, disastrous man." (Pufka put her tongue out at him.) "And as for you," she looked at Paklin, "there is no need to tell you- -you know quite well that you're nothing but a giddy goose! And that one—"

She pointed to Nejdanov, but hesitated.

"Well?" he asked; "do please tell me what sort of a man I am."

"What sort of a man are you," Fimishka repeated slowly. You are pitiable—that is all!"

"Pitiable! But why?

"Just so. I pity you—that is all I can say."

"But why do you pity me?"

"Because my eyes tell me so. Do you think I am a fool? I am cleverer than you, in spite of your red hair. I pity you—that is all!"

There was a brief silence—they all looked at one another, but did not utter a word.

"Well, goodbye, dear friends," Paklin exclaimed. "We must have bored you to death with our long visit. It is time for these gentlemen to be going, and I am going with them. Goodbye, thanks for your kindness."

"Goodbye, goodbye, come again. Don't be on ceremony," Fomishka and Fimishka exclaimed together. Then Fomishka suddenly drawled out:

"Many, many, many years of life. Many—"

"Many, many," Kalliopitch chimed in quite unexpectedly, when opening the door for the young men to pass out.

The whole four suddenly found themselves in the street before the squat little house, while Pufka's voice was heard from within:

"You fools!" she cried. "You fools!"

Paklin laughed aloud, but no one responded. Markelov looked at each in turn, as though he expected to hear some expression of indignation. Solomin alone smiled his habitual smile.

Chapter 20

"WELL," Paklin was the first to begin, "we have been to the eighteenth century, now let us fly to the twentieth! Golushkin is such a go-ahead man that one can hardly count him as belonging to the nineteenth."

"Why, do you know him?"

"What a question! Did you know my poll-parrots?"

"No, but you introduced us."

"Well, then, introduce me. I don't suppose you have any secrets to talk over, and Golushkin is a hospitable man. You will see; he will be delighted to see a new face. We are not very formal here in S."

"Yes," Markelov muttered, "I have certainly noticed an absence of formality about the people here."

Paklin shook his head.

"I suppose that was a hit for me… I can't help it. I deserve it, no doubt. But may I suggest, my new friend, that you throw off those sad, oppressive thoughts, no doubt due to your bilious temperament … and chiefly—"

"And you sir, my new friend," Markelov interrupted him angrily, "allow me to tell you, by way of a warning, that I have never in my life been given to joking, least of all today! And what do you know about my temperament, I should like to know? It strikes me that it is not so very long since we first set eyes on one another."

"There, there, don't get angry and don't swear. I believe you without that," Paklin exclaimed. "0h you," he said, turning to Solomin, "you, whom the wise Fimishka called a cool sort of man, and there certainly is something restful about you—do you think I had the slightest intention of saying anything unpleasant to anyone or of joking out of place? I only suggested going with you to Golushkin's. Besides, I'm such a harmless person; it's not my fault that Mr. Markelov has a bilious complexion."

Solomin first shrugged one shoulder, then the other. It was a habit of his when he did not quite know what to say.

"I don't think," he said at last, "that you could offend anyone, Mr. Paklin, or that you wished to—and why should you not come with us to Mr. Golushkin? We shall, no doubt, spend our time there just as pleasantly as we did at your kinsman's—and just as profitably most likely."

Paklin threatened him with his finger.

"Oh! I see, you can be wicked too if you like! However, you are also coming to Golushkin's, are you not?"

"Of course I am. I have wasted the day as it is."

"Well then, en avant, marchons! To the twentieth century! To the twentieth century! Nejdanov, you are an advanced man, lead the way!"

"Very well, come along; only don't keep on repeating the same jokes lest we should think you are running short."

"I have still enough left for you, my dear friends," Paklin said gaily and went on ahead, not by leaping, but by limping, as he said.

"What an amusing man!" Solomin remarked as he was walking along arm-in-arm with Nejdanov; "if we should ever be sent to Siberia, which Heaven forbid, there will be someone to entertain us at any rate."

Markelov walked in silence behind the others.

Meanwhile great preparations were going on at Golushkin's to produce a "chic" dinner. (Golushkin, as a man of the highest European culture, kept a French cook, who had formerly been dismissed from a club for dirtiness.) A nasty, greasy fish soup was prepared, various pates chauds and fricasses and, most important of all, several bottles of champagne had been procured and put into ice.

The host met the young people with his characteristic awkwardness, bustle, and much giggling. He was delighted to see Paklin as the latter had predicted and asked of him—

"Is he one of us? Of course he is! I need not have asked," he said, without waiting for a reply. He began telling them how he had just come from that "old fogey" the governor, and how the latter worried him to death about some sort of charity institution. It was difficult to say what satisfied Golushkin most, the fact that he was received at the governor's, or that he was able to abuse that worth before these advanced, young men. Then he introduced them to the promised proselyte, who turned out to be no other than the sleek consumptive individual with the long

neck whom they had seen in the morning, Vasia, Golushkin's clerk. "He hasn't much to say," Golushkin declared, "but is devoted heart and soul to our cause." To this Vasia bowed, blushed, blinked his eyes, and grinned in such a manner that it was impossible to say whether he was merely a vulgar fool or an out-and-out knave and blackguard.

"Well, gentlemen, let us go to dinner," Golushkin exclaimed.

They partook of various kinds of salt fish to give them an appetite and sat down to the table. Directly after the soup, Golushkin ordered the champagne to be brought up, which came out in frozen little lumps as he poured it into the glasses. "For our … our enterprise!" Golushkin exclaimed, winking at the servant, as much as to say, "One must be careful in the presence of strangers." The proselyte Vasia continued silent, and though he sat on the very edge of his chair and conducted himself generally with a servility quite out of keeping with the convictions to which, according to his master, he was devoted body and soul, yet gulped down the wine with an amazing greediness. The others made up for his silence, however, that is, Golushkin and Paklin, especially Paklin. Nejdanov was inwardly annoyed, Markelov angry and indignant, just as indignant, though in a different way, as he had been at the Subotchevs'; Solomin was observant.

Paklin was in high spirits and delighted Golushkin with his sharp, ready wit. The latter had not the slightest suspicion that the "little cripple" every now and again whispered to Nejdanov, who happened to be sitting beside him, the most unflattering remarks at his, Golushkin's, expense. He thought him "a simple sort of fellow" who might be patronised; that was probably why he liked him. Had Paklin been sitting next him he would no doubt have poked him in the ribs or slapped him on the shoulder, but as it was, he merely contented himself by nodding and winking in his direction. Between him and Nejdanov sat Markelov, like a dark cloud, and then Solomin. Golushkin went into convulsions at every word Paklin said, laughed on trust in advance, holding his sides and showing his bluish gums. Paklin soon saw what was expected of him and began abusing everything (it being an easy thing for him), everything and everybody; conservatives, liberals, officials, lawyers, administrators, landlords, county councils and district councils, Moscow and St. Petersburg. "Yes, yes, yes," Golushkin put in, "that's just how it is! For instance, our mayor here is a perfect ass! A hopeless blockhead! I tell him one thing after another, but he doesn't understand a single word; just like our governor!"

"Is your governor a fool then?" Paklin asked.

"I told you he was an ass!"

"By the way, does he speak in a hoarse voice or through his nose?"

"What do you mean?" Golushkin asked somewhat bewildered.

"Why, don't you know? In Russia all our important civilians speak in a hoarse voice and our great army men speak through the nose. Only our very highest dignitaries do both at the same time."

Golushkin roared with laughter till the tears rolled down his cheeks.

"Yes, yes," he spluttered, "if he talks through his nose. . then he's an army man!"

"You idiot!" Paklin thought to himself.

"Everything is rotten in this country, wherever you may turn!" he bawled out after a pause. "Everything is rotten, everything!

"My dear Kapiton Andraitch," Paklin began suggestively (he had just asked Nejdanov in an undertone, "Why does he throw his arms about as if his coat were too tight for him?"), "my dear Kapiton Andraitch, believe me, half measures are of no use!"

"Who talks of half measures!" Golushkin shouted furiously (he had suddenly ceased laughing), "there's only one thing to be done; it must all be pulled up by the roots: Vasia, drink!"

"I am drinking, Kapiton Andraitch," the clerk observed, emptying a glass down his throat.

Golushkin followed his suit.

"I wonder he doesn't burst!" Paklin whispered to Nejdanov.

"He's used to it!" the latter replied.

But the clerk was not the only one who drank. Little by little the wine affected them all. Nejdanov, Markelov, and even Solomin began taking part in the conversation.

At first disdainfully, as if annoyed with himself for doing so, for not keeping up his character, Nejdanov began to hold forth. He maintained that the time had now come to leave off playing with words; that the time had con e for "action," that they were now on sure ground! And then, quite unconscious of the fact that he was contradicting himself, he began to demand of them to show him what real existing elements they had to rely on, saying that as far as he could see society was utterly unsympathetic towards them, and the people were as ignorant as could be.

Nobody made any objection to what he said, not because there was nothing to object to, but because everyone was talking on his own account. Markelov hammered out obstinately in his hoarse, angry, monotonous voice ("just as if he were chopping cabbage," Paklin remarked). Precisely what he was talking about no one could make out, but the word "artillery" could be heard in a momentary hush. He was no doubt referring to the defects he had discovered in its organisation. Germans and adjutants were also brought in. Solomin remarked that there were two ways of waiting, waiting and doing nothing and waiting while pushing things ahead at the same time.

"We don't want moderates," Markelov said angrily.

"The moderates have so far been working among the upper classes," Solomin remarked, "and we must go for the lower."

"We don't want it! damnation! We don't want it!" Golushkin bawled out furiously. "We must do everything with one blow! With one blow, I say!"

"What is the use of extreme measures? It's like jumping out of the window."

"And I'll jump too, if necessary!" Golushkin shouted. "I'll jump! and so will Vasia! I've only to tell him and he'll jump! eh, Vasia? You'll jump, eh?"

The clerk finished his glass of champagne.

"Where you go, Kapiton Andraitch, there I follow. I shouldn't dare do otherwise."

"You had better not, or I'll make mincemeat of you!"

Soon a perfect babel followed.

Like the first flakes of snow whirling round and round in the mild autumn air, so words began flying in all directions in Golushkin's hot, stuffy dining-room; all kinds of words, rolling and tumbling over one another: progress, government, literature, the taxation question, the church question, the woman question; the law-court question, realism, nihilism, communism, international, clerical, liberal, capital, administration, organisation, association, and even crystallisation! It was just what Golushkin wanted; this uproar seemed to him the real thing. He was triumphant. "Look at us! out of the way or I'll knock you on the head! Kapiton Golushkin is coming!" At last the clerk Vasia became so tipsy that he began to giggle and talk to his plate. All at once he jumped up shouting wildly, "What sort of devil is this PROgymnasium?"

Golushkin sprang up too, and throwing back his hot, flushed face, on which an expression of vulgar self-satisfaction was curiously mingled with a feeling of terror, a secret misgiving, he bawled out, "I'll sacrifice another thousand! Get it for me, Vasia!" To which Vasia replied, "All right!"

Just then Paklin, pale and perspiring (he had been drinking no less than the clerk during the last quarter of an hour), jumped up from his seat and, waving both his arms above his head, shouted brokenly, "Sacrifice! Sacrifice! What pollution of such a holy word! Sacrifice! No one dares live up to thee, no one can fulfill thy commands, certainly not one of us here—and this fool, this miserable money-bag opens its belly, lets forth a few of its miserable roubles, and shouts 'Sacrifice!' And wants to be thanked, expects a wreath of laurels, the mean scoundrel!

Golushkin either did not hear or did not understand what Paklin was saying, or perhaps took it only as a joke, because he shouted again, "Yes, a thousand roubles! Kapiton Golushkin keeps his word!" And so saying he thrust his hand into a side pocket. "Here is the money, take it! Tear it to pieces! Remember Kapiton!" When under excitement Golushkin invariably talked of himself in the third person, as children often do. Nejdanov picked up the notes which Golushkin had flung on the table covered with wine stains. Since there was nothing more to wait for, and the hour was getting late, they rose, took their hats, and departed.

They all felt giddy as soon as they got out into the fresh air, especially Paklin.

"Well, where are we going to now?" he asked with an effort.

"I don't know were you are going, but I'm going home," Solomin replied.

"Back to the factory? " Yes."

"Now, at night, and on foot?"

"Why not? I don't think there are any wolves or robbers here— and my legs are quite strong enough to carry me. It's cooler walking at night."

"But hang it all, it's four miles!

"I wouldn't mind if it were more. Good-bye, gentlemen." Solomin buttoned his coat, pulled his cap over his forehead, lighted a cigar, and walked down the street with long strides.

"And where are you going to?" Paklin asked, turning to Nejdanov.

"I'm going home with him." He pointed to Markelov, who was standing motionless, his hands crossed on his breast. "We have horses and a conveyance."

"Very well… . And I'm going to Fomishka's and Fimishka's oasis. And do you know what I should like to say? There's twaddle here and twaddle there, only that twaddle, the twaddle of the eighteenth century, is nearer to the Russian character than the twaddle of the twentieth century. Goodbye, gentlemen. I'm drunk, so don't be offended at what I say, only a better woman than my sister Snandulia … is not to be found on God's earth, although she is a hunchback and called Snandulia. That's how things are arranged in this world! She ought to have such a name. Do you know who Saint Snandulia was? She was a virtuous woman who used to visit prisons and heal the wounds of the sick. But … goodbye! goodbye, Nejdanov, thou man to be pitied! And you, officer… ugh! misanthrope! goodbye!" He dragged himself away, limping and swaying from side to side, towards the oasis, while Markelov and Nejdanov sought out the posting inn where they had left their conveyance, ordered the horses to be harnessed, and half an hour later were driving along the high road.

Chapter 21

THE sky was overcast with low-hanging clouds, and though it was light enough to see the cart-ruts winding along the road, still to the right and left no separate object could be distinguished, everything blending together into dark, heavy masses. It was a dim, unsettled kind of night; the wind blew in terrific gusts, bringing with it the scent of rain and wheat, which covered the broad fields. When they passed the oak which served as a signpost and turned down a by-road, driving became more difficult, the narrow track being quite lost at times. The coach moved along at a slower pace.

"I hope we're not going to lose our way!" Nejdanov remarked; he had been quite silent until then.

"I don't think so," Markelov responded. "Two misfortunes never happen in one day."

"But what was the first misfortune?"

"A day wasted for nothing. Is that of no importance?"

"Yes … certainly … and then this Golushkin! We shouldn't have drank so much wine. My head is simply splitting."

"I wasn't thinking of Golushkin. We got some money from him at any rate, so our visit wasn't altogether wasted."

"But surely you're not really sorry that Paklin took us to his … what did he call them … poll-parrots?

"As for that, there's nothing to be either sorry or glad about. I'm not interested in such people. That wasn't the misfortune I was referring to."

"What was it then?"

Markelov made no reply, but withdrew himself a little further into his corner, as if he were muffling himself up. Nejdanov could not see his face very clearly, only his moustache stood out in a straight black line, but he had felt ever since the morning that there was something in Markelov that was best left alone, some mysteriously unknown worry.

"I say, Sergai Mihailovitch," Nejdanov began, "do you really attach any importance to Mr. Kisliakov's letters that you gave me today? They are utter nonsense, if you'll excuse my saying so."

Markelov drew himself up.

"In the first place," he began angrily, "I don't agree with you about these letters—I find them extremely interesting … and conscientious! In the second place, Kisliakov works very hard and, what is more, he is in earnest; he BELIEVES in our cause, believes in the revolution! And I must say that you, Alexai Dmitritch, are very luke-warm—YOU don't believe in our cause!"

"What makes you think so? " Nejdanov asked slowly.

"It is easy to see from your very words, from your whole behaviour. Today, for instance, at Golushkin's, who said that he failed to see any elements that we could rely on? You! Who demanded to have them pointed out to him? You again! And when that friend of yours, that grinning buffoon, Mr. Paklin, stood up and declared with his eyes raised to heaven that not one of us was capable of self-sacrifice, who approved of it and nodded to him encouragingly? Wasn't it you? Say what you like of yourself … think what you like of yourself, you know best … that is your affair, but I know people who could give up everything that is beautiful in life—even love itself—to serve their convictions, to be true to them! Well, YOU … couldn't have done that, today at any rate!"

"Today? Why not today in particular?"

"Oh, don't pretend, for heaven's sake, you happy Don Juan, you myrtle-crowned lover!" Markelov shouted, quite forgetting the coachman, who, though he did not turn round on the box, must have heard every word. It is true the coachman was at that moment more occupied with the road than with what the gentlemen were saying behind him. He loosened the shaft-horse carefully, though somewhat nervously, she shook her head, backed a little, and went down a slope which had no business there at all.

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand you," Nejdanov observed.

Markelov gave a forced, malicious laugh.

"So you don't understand me! ha, ha, ha! I know everything, my dear sir! I know whom you made love to yesterday, whom you've completely conquered with your good looks and honeyed words! I know who lets you into her room … after ten o'clock at night!"

"Sir!" the coachman exclaimed suddenly, turning to Markelov, "hold the reins, please. I'll get down and have a look. I think we've gone off the track. There seems a sort of ravine here."

The carriage was, in fact, standing almost on one side. Markelov seized the reins which the coachman handed to him and continued just as loudly:

"I don't blame you in the least, Alexai Dmitritch! You took advantage of… . You were quite right. No wonder that you're not so keen about our cause now … as I said before, you have something else on your mind. And, really, who can tell beforehand what will please a girl's heart or what man can achieve what she may desire?"

"I understand now," Nejdanov began; "I understand your vexation and can guess … who spied on us and lost no time in letting you know—"It does not seem to depend on merit," Markelov continued, pretending not to have heard Nejdanov, and purposely drawling out each word in a sing-song voice, "no extraordinary spiritual or physical attractions… . Oh no! It's only the damned luck of all … bastards!"

The last sentence Markelov pronounced abruptly and hurriedly, but suddenly stopped as if turned to stone.

Nejdanov felt himself grow pale in the darkness and tingled all over. He could scarcely restrain himself from flying at Markelov and seizing him by the throat. "Only blood will wipe out this insult," he thought.

"I've found the road!" the coachman cried, making his appearance at the right front wheel, " I turned to the left by mistake—but it doesn't matter, we'll soon be home. It's not much farther. Sit still, please!"

He got onto the box, took the reins from Markelov, pulled the shaft-horse a little to one side, and the carriage, after one or two jerks, rolled along more smoothly and evenly. The darkness seemed to part and lift itself, a cloud of smoke could be seen curling out of a chimney, ahead some sort of hillock, a light twinkled, vanished, then another… . A dog barked.

"That's our place," the coachman observed. "Gee up, my pretties!"

The lights became more and more numerous as they drove on.

"After the way in which you insulted me," Nejdanov said at last, "you will quite understand that I couldn't spend the night under your roof, and I must ask you, however unpleasant it may be for me to do so, to be kind enough to lend me your carriage as soon as we get to your house to take me back to the town. Tomorrow I shall find some means of getting

home, and will then communicate with you in a way which you doubtless expect.

Markelov did not reply at once.

"Nejdanov," he exclaimed suddenly, in a soft, despairing tone of voice, "Nejdanov! For Heaven's sake come into the house if only to let me beg for your forgiveness on my knees! Nejdanov! forget … forget my senseless words! Oh, if some one only knew how wretched I feel!" Markelov struck himself on the breast with his fist, a groan seemed to come from him. "Nejdanov. Be generous… . Give me your hand… . Say that you forgive me!"

Nejdanov held out his hand irresolutely—Markelov squeezed it so hard that he could almost have cried out.

The carriage stopped at the door of the house.

"Listen to me, Nejdanov," Markelov said to him a quarter of an hour later in his study, "listen." (He addressed him as "thou," and in this unexpected "THOU" addressed to a man whom he knew to be a successful rival, whom he had only just cruelly insulted, wished to kill, to tear to pieces, in this familiar word "thou" there was a ring of irrevocable renunciation, sad, humble supplication, and a kind of claim …) Nejdanov recognised this claim and responded to it by addressing him in the same way. "Listen! I've only just told you that I've refused the happiness of love, renounced everything to serve my convictions. .

It wasn't true, I was only bragging! Love has never been offered to me, I've had nothing to renounce! I was born unlucky and will continue so for the rest of my days … and perhaps it's for the best. Since I can't get that, I must turn my attention to something else! If you can combine the one with the other … love and be loved … and serve the cause at the same time, you're lucky! I envy you … but as for myself … I can't. You happy man! You happy man! I can't."

Markelov said all this softly, sitting on a low stool, his head bent and arms hanging loose at his sides. Nejdanov stood before him lost in a sort of dreamy attentiveness, and though Markelov had called him a happy man, he neither looked happy nor did he feel himself to be so.

"I was deceived in my youth," Markelov went on; "she was a remarkable girl, but she threw me over … and for whom? For a German! for an adjutant! And Mariana—"

He stopped. It was the first time he had pronounced her name and it seemed to burn his lips.

"Mariana did not deceive me. She told me plainly that she did not care for me… There is nothing in me she could care for, so she gave herself to you. Of course, she was quite free to do so."

"Stop a minute!" Nejdanov exclaimed. "What are you saying? What do you imply by the words 'gave herself'? I don't know what your sister told you, but I assure you—"

"I didn't mean physically, but morally, that is, with the heart and soul," Markelov interrupted him. He was obviously displeased with Nejdanov's exclamation. "She couldn't have done better. As for my sister, she didn't, of course, wish to hurt me. It can make no difference to her, but she no doubt hates you and Mariana too. She did not tell me anything untrue … but enough of her!"

"Yes," Nejdanov thought to himself, "she does hate us." It's all for the best," Markelov continued, still sitting in the same position. "The last fetters have been broken; there is nothing to hinder me now! It doesn't matter that Golushkin is an ass, and as for Kisliakov's letters, they may perhaps be absurd, but we must consider the most important thing. Kisliakov says that everything is ready. Perhaps you don't believe that too."

Nejdanov did not reply.

"You may be right, but if we've to wait until everything, absolutely everything, is ready, we shall never make a beginning. If we weigh all the consequences beforehand we're sure to find some bad ones among them. For instance, when our forefathers emancipated the serfs, do you think they could foresee that a whole class of money-lending landlords would spring up as a result of the emancipation? Landlords who sell a peasant eight bushels of rotten rye for six roubles and in return for it get labour for the whole six roubles, then the same quantity of good sound rye and interest on top of that! Which means that they drain the peasants to the last drop of blood! You'll agree that our emancipators could hardly have foreseen that. Even if they had foreseen it, they would still have been quite right in freeing the serfs without weighing all the consequences beforehand! That is why I have decided!"

Nejdanov looked at Markelov with amazement, but the latter turned to one side and directed his gaze into a corner of the room. He sat with his eyes closed, biting his lips and chewing his moustache.

"Yes, I've decided!" he repeated, striking his knee with his brown hairy hand. "I'm very obstinate… It's not for nothing that I'm half a Little Russian."

He got up, dragged himself into his bedroom, and came back with a small portrait of Mariana in a glazed frame.

"Take this," he said in a sad, though steady voice. "I drew it some time ago. I don't draw well, but I think it's like her." (It was a pencil sketch in profile and was certainly like Mariana.) "Take it, Alexai; it is my bequest, and with this portrait I give you all my rights… . I know I never had any … but you know what I mean! I give you up everything, and her… . She is very good, Alexai—"

Markelov ceased; his chest heaved visibly.

"Take it. You are not angry with me, are you? Well, take it then. It's no use to me … now.

Nejdanov took the portrait, but a strange sensation oppressed his heart. It seemed to him that he had no right to take this gift; that if Markelov knew what was in his, Nejdanov's, heart, he would not have given it him. He stood holding the round piece of cardboard, carefully set in a black frame with a mount of gold paper, not knowing what to do with it. "Why, this is a man's whole life I'm holding in my hand," he thought. He fully realised the sacrifice Markelov was making, but why, why especially to him? Should he give back the portrait? No! that would be the grossest insult. And after all, was not the face dear to him? Did he not love her?

Nejdanov turned his gaze on Markelov not without some inward misgiving. "Was he not looking at him, trying to guess his thoughts?" But Markelov was standing in a corner biting his moustache.

The old servant came into the room carrying a candle. Markelov started.

"It's time we were in bed, Alexai," he said. "Morning is wiser than evening. You shall have the horses tomorrow. Goodbye."

"And goodbye to you too, old fellow," he added turning to the servant and slapping him on the shoulder. "Don't be angry with me!"

The old man was so astonished that he nearly dropped the candle, and as he fixed his eyes on his master there was an expression in them of something other, something more, than his habitual dejection.

Nejdanov retired to his room. He was feeling wretched. His head was aching from the wine he had drunk, there were ringing noises in his ears, and stars jumping about in front of his eyes, even though he shut them. Golushkin, Vasia the clerk, Fomishka and Fimishka, were dancing about before him, with Mariana's form in the distance, as if distrustful and

afraid to come near. Everything that he had said or done during the day now seemed to him so utterly false, such useless nonsense, and the thing that ought to be done, ought to be striven for, was nowhere to be found; unattainable, under lock and key, in the depths of a bottomless pit.

He was filled with a desire to go to Markelov and say to him, "Here, take back your gift, take it back!"

"Ugh! What a miserable thing life is!" he exclaimed.

He departed early on the following morning. Markelov was already standing at the door surrounded by peasants, but whether he had asked them to come, or they had come of their own accord, Nejdanov did not know.. Markelov said very little and parted with him coldly, but it seemed to Nejdanov that he had something of importance to communicate to him.

The old servant made his appearance with his usual melancholy expression.

The carriage soon left the town behind it, and coming out into the open country began flying at a furious rate. The horses were the same, but the driver counted on a good tip, as Nejdanov lived in a rich house. And as is usually the case, when the driver has either had a drink, or expects to get one, the horses go at a good pace.

It was an ordinary June day, though the air was rather keen. A steady, high wind was blowing, but raising no dust in the road, owing to last night's rain. The laburnums glistened, rustling to and fro in the breeze; a ripple ran over everything. From afar the cry of the quail was carried over the hills, over the grassy ravines, as if the very cry was possessed of wings; the rooks were bathing in the sunshine; along the straight, bare line of the horizon little specks no bigger than flies could be distinguished moving about. These were some peasants re-ploughing a fallow field.

Nejdanov was so lost in thought that he did not see all this. He went on and on and did not even notice when they drove through Sipiagin's village.

He trembled suddenly as he caught sight of the house, the first story and Mariana's window. "Yes," he said to himself, a warm glow entering his heart, "Markelov was right. She is a good girl and I love her."

Chapter 22

NEJDANOV changed his clothes hurriedly and went in to give Kolia his lesson. On the way he ran across Sipiagin in the dining-room. He bowed to him with chilling politeness, muttered through his teeth, "Got back all right?" and went into his study. The great statesman had already decided in his ministerial mind that as soon as the vacation came to an end he would lose no time in packing off to St. Petersburg "this extremely revolutionary young tutor," but meanwhile would keep an eye on him. "Je n'ai pas eu la main heureuse cette fois-ci", he thought to himself, still "j'aurais pu tomber pire". Valentina Mihailovna's sentiments towards Nejdanov however, were not quite so negative; she simply could not endure the idea that he, "a mere boy," had slighted her! Mariana had not been mistaken, Valentina Mihailovna had listened at the door in the corridor; the illustrious lady was not above such proceedings. Although she had said nothing to her "flighty" niece during Nejdanov's absence, still she had let her plainly understand that everything was known to her, and that if she had not been so painfully sorry for her, and did not despise her from the bottom of her heart, she would have been most frightfully angry at the whole thing.

An expression of restrained inward contempt played over her face. She raised her eyebrows in scorn and pity when she looked at or spoke to Mariana, and she would fix her wonderful eyes, full of tender remonstrance and painful disgust, on the willful girl, who, after all her "fancies and eccentricities," had ended by kissing an insignificant undergraduate … in a dark room!

Poor Mariana! Her severe, proud lips had never tasted any man's kisses.

Valentina Mihailovna had not told her husband of the discovery she had made. She merely contented herself by addressing a few words to Mariana in his presence, accompanied by a significant smile, quite irrelevant to the occasion. She regretted having written to her brother, but

was, on the whole, more pleased that the thing was done than be spared the regret and the letter not written.

Nejdanov got a glimpse of Mariana at lunch in the dining-room. It seemed to him that she had grown thinner and paler. She was not looking her best on that day, but the penetrating glance she turned on him directly he entered the room went straight to his heart. Valentina Mihailovna looked at him constantly, as though she were inwardly congratulating him. "Splendid! Very smart!" he read on her face, while she was studying his to find out if Markelov had shown him the letter. She decided in the end that he had.

On hearing that Nejdanov had been to the factory of which Solomin was the manager, Sipiagin began asking him various questions about it, but was soon convinced from the young man's replies that he had seen nothing there and dropped into a majestic silence, as if reproaching himself for having expected any practical knowledge from such an inexperienced individual! On going out of the room Mariana managed to whisper to Nejdanov: "Wait for me in the birch grove at the end of the garden. I'll be there as soon as possible."

"She is just as familiar with me as Markelov was," he thought to himself, and a strange, pleasant sensation came over him. How strange it would have seemed to him if she had suddenly become distant and formal again, if she had turned away from him. He felt that such a thing would have made him utterly wretched, but was not sure in his own mind whether he loved her or not. She was dear to him and he felt the need of her above everything—this he acknowledged from the bottom of his heart.

The grove Mariana mentioned consisted of some hundreds of big old weeping-birches. The wind had not fallen and the long tangled branches were tossing hither and thither like loosened tresses. The clouds, still high, flew quickly over the sky, every now and again obscuring the sun and making everything of an even hue. Suddenly it would make its appearance again and brilliant patches of light would flash out once more through the branches, crossing and recrossing, a tangled pattern of light and shade. The roar of the trees seemed to be filled with a kind of festive joy, like to the violent joy with which passion breaks into a sad, troubled heart. It was just such a heart that Nejdanov carried in his bosom. He leaned against the trunk of a tree and waited. He did not really know what he was feeling and had no desire to know, but it seemed to him more awful, and at the same time easier, than at Markelov's. Above

everything he wanted to see her, to speak to her. The knot that suddenly binds two separate existences already had him in its grasp. Nejdanov thought of the rope that is flung to the quay to make fast a ship. Now it is twisted about the post and the ship stops … Safe in port! Thank God!

He trembled suddenly. A woman's dress could be seen in the distance coming along the path. It was Mariana. But whether she was coming towards him or going away from him he could not tell until he noticed that the patches of light and shade glided over her figure from below upwards. So she was coming towards him; they would have glided from above downwards had she been going away from him. A few moments longer and she was standing before him with her bright face full of welcome and a caressing light in her eyes. A glad smile played about her lips. He seized the hand she held out to him, but could not say a single word; she also was silent. She had walked very quickly and was somewhat out of breath, but seemed glad that he was pleased to see her. She was the first to speak.

"Well," she began, "tell me quickly what you've decided."

Nejdanov was surprised.

"Decided? Why, was it necessary to decide anything just now?"

"Oh, you know what I mean. Tell me what you talked about, whom you've seen—if you've met Solomin. Tell me everything, everything. But wait a moment; let us go on a little further. I know a spot not quite so conspicuous as this."

She made him come with her. He followed her obediently over the tall thin grass.

She led him to the place she mentioned, and they sat down on the trunk of a birch that had been blown down in a storm.

"Now begin!" she said, and added directly afterwards, "I am so glad to see you again! I thought these two days would never come to an end! Do you know, I'm convinced that Valentina Mihailovna listened to us."

"She wrote to Markelov about it," Nejdanov remarked.

"Did she?"

Mariana was silent for a while. She blushed all over, not from shame, but from another, deeper feeling.

"She is a wicked, spiteful woman!" she said slowly and quietly. "She had no right to do such a thing! But it doesn't matter. Now tell me your news."

Nejdanov began talking and Mariana listened to him with a sort of stony attention, only stopping him when she thought he was hurrying over things, not giving her sufficient details. However, not all the details of his visit were of equal interest to her; she laughed over Fomishka and Fimishka, but they did not interest her. Their life was too remote from hers.

"It's just like hearing about Nebuchadnezzar," she remarked.

But she was very keen to know what Markelov had said, what Golushkin had thought (though she soon realised what sort of a bird he was), and above all wanted to know Solomin's opinion and what sort of a man he was. These were the things that interested her. "But when? when?" was a question constantly in her mind and on her lips the whole time Nejdanov was talking, while he, on the other hand, seemed to try and avoid everything that might give a definite answer to that question. He began to notice himself that he laid special stress on those details that were of least interest to Mariana. He pulled himself up, but returned to them again involuntarily. Humorous descriptions made her impatient, a sceptic or dejected tone hurt her. It was necessary to keep strictly to everything concerning the "cause," and however much he said on the subject did not seem to weary her. It brought back to Nejdanov's mind how once, before he had entered the university, when he was staying with some friends of his in the country one summer, he had undertaken to tell the children some stories; they had also paid no attention to descriptions, personal expressions, personal sensations, they had also demanded nothing but facts and figures. Mariana was not a child, but she was like a child in the directness and simplicity of her feelings.

Nejdanov was sincerely enthusiastic in his praise of Markelov, and expressed himself with particular warmth about Solomin. While uttering the most enthusiastic expressions about him, he kept asking himself continually why he had such a high opinion of this man. He had not said anything very brilliant and, in fact, some of his words were in direct opposition to his (Nejdanov's) own convictions. "His head is screwed on the right way," he thought. "A cool, steady man, as Fimishka said; a powerful man, of calm, firm strength. He knows what he wants, has confidence in himself, and arouses confidence in others. He has no anxieties and is well-balanced! That is the main thing; he has balance, just what is lacking in me!" Nejdanov ceased speaking and became lost in meditation. Suddenly he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Alexai! What is the matter with you?" Mariana asked.

He took her tiny, strong hand from his shoulder and kissed it for the first time. Mariana laughed softly, surprised that such a thing should have occurred to him. She in her turn became pensive.

"Did Markelov show you Valentina Mihailovna's letter?" she asked at last.

"Yes, he did."

"Well, and how is he?"

"Markelov? He is the most honourable, most unselfish man in existence! He—"

Nejdanov wanted to tell Mariana about the portrait, but pulled himself up and added, "He is the soul of honour!"

"Oh yes, I know."

Mariana became pensive again. She suddenly turned to Nejdanov on the trunk they were both sitting on and asked quickly:

"Well? What have you decided on?"

Nejdanov shrugged his shoulders.

"I've already told you, dear, that we've decided nothing as yet; we must wait a little longer."

"But why?"

"Those were our last instructions." ("I'm lying," Nejdanov thought to himself.)

"From whom?"

"Why, you know … from Vassily Nikolaevitch. And then we must wait until Ostrodumov comes back."

Mariana looked questioningly at Nejdanov. "But tell me, have you ever seen this Vassily Nikolaevitch?

"Yes. I've seen him twice … for a minute or two."

"What is he like? Is he an extraordinary man?"

"I don't quite know how to tell you. He is our leader now and directs everything. We couldn't get on without discipline in our movement; we must obey someone." ("What nonsense I'm talking!" Nejdanov thought.)

"What is he like to look at?

"Oh, he's short, thick-set, dark, with high cheek-bones like a Kalmick … a rather coarse face, only he has very bright, intelligent eyes."

"And what does he talk like?"

"He does not talk, he commands."

"Why did they make him leader?"

"He is a man of strong character. Won't give in to anyone. Would sooner kill if necessary. People are afraid of him."

"And what is Solomin like?" Mariana asked after a pause.

"Solomin is also not good-looking, but has a nice, simple, honest face. Such faces are to be found among schoolboys of the right sort."

Nejdanov had described Solomin accurately.

Mariana gazed at him for a long, long time, then said, as if to herself:

"You have also a nice face. I think it would be easy to get on with you."

Nejdanov was touched; he took her hand again and raised it to his lips.

"No more gallantries!" she said laughing. Mariana always laughed when her hand was kissed. "I've done something very naughty and must ask you to forgive me."

"What have you done?"

"Well, when you were away, I went into your room and saw a copy-book of verses lying on your table" (Nejdanov shuddered; he remembered having left it there), "and I must confess to you that I couldn't overcome my curiosity and read the contents. Are they your verses?"

"Yes, they are. And do you know, Mariana, that one of the strongest proofs that I care for you and have the fullest confidence in you is that I am hardly angry at what you have done?"

"Hardly! Then you are just a tiny bit. I'm so glad you call me Mariana. I can't call you Nejdanov, so I shall call you Alexai. There is a poem which begins, 'When I die, dear friend, remember,' is that also yours?"

"Yes. Only please don't talk about this any more… Don't torture me."

Mariana shook her head.

"It's a very sad poem… I hope you wrote it before we became intimate. The verses are good though … as far as I can judge. I think you have the making of a literary man in you, but you have chosen a better and higher calling than literature. It was good to do that kind of work when it was impossible to do anything else."

Nejdanov looked at her quickly.

"Do you think so? I agree with you. Better ruin there, than success here."

Mariana stood up with difficulty.

"Yes, my dear, you are right!" she exclaimed, her whole face beaming with triumph and emotion, "you are right! But perhaps it may not mean ruin for us yet. We shall succeed, you will see; we'll be useful, our life won't be wasted. We'll go among the people … Do you know any sort of handicraft? No? Never mind, we'll work just the same. We'll bring them, our brothers, everything that we know… If necessary, I can cook, wash, sew … You'll see, you'll see… . And there won't be any kind of merit in it, only happiness, happiness—"

Mariana ceased and fixed her eyes eagerly in the distance, not that which lay before her, but another distance as yet unknown to her, which she seemed to see… . She was all aglow.

Nejdanov bent down to her waist.

"Oh, Mariana!" he whispered. "I am not worthy of you!"

She trembled all over.

"It's time to go home!" she exclaimed, "or Valentina Mihailovna will be looking for us again. However, I think she's given me up as a bad job. I'm quite a black sheep in her eyes."

Mariana pronounced the last words with such a bright joyful expression that Nejdanov could not help laughing as he looked at her and repeating, "black sheep!"

"She is awfully hurt," Mariana went on, "that you are not at her feet. But that is nothing. The most important thing is that I can't stay here any longer. I must run away."

"Run away? " Nejdanov asked.

"Yes… . You are not going to stay here, are you? We'll go away together… . We must work together… You'll come with me, won't you?"

"To the ends of the earth!" Nejdanov exclaimed, his voice ringing with sudden emotion in a transport of gratitude. "To the ends of the earth!" At that moment he would have gone with her wherever she wanted, without so much as looking back.

Mariana understood him and gave a gentle, blissful sigh.

"Then take my hand, dearest—only don't kiss it—press it firmly, like a comrade, like a friend—like this!"

They walked home together, pensive, happy. The young grass caressed their feet, the young leaves rustled about them, patches of light and shade played over their garments—and they both smiled at the wild

play of the light, at the merry gusts of wind, at the fresh, sparkling leaves, at their own youth, and at one another.

Chapter 23

THE dawn was already approaching on the night after Golushkin's dinner when Solomin, after a brisk walk of about five miles, knocked at the gate in the high wall surrounding the factory. The watchman let him in at once and, followed by three house-dogs wagging their tails with great delight, accompanied him respectfully to his own dwelling. He seemed to be very pleased that the chief had got back safely.

"How did you manage to get here at night, Vassily Fedotitch? We didn't expect you until tomorrow."

"Oh, that's all right, Gavrilla. It's much nicer walking at night."

The most unusually friendly relations existed between Solomin and his workpeople. They respected him as a superior, treated him as one of themselves, and considered him to be very learned. "Whatever Vassily Fedotitch says," they declared, "is sacred! Because he has learned everything there is to be learned, and there isn't an Englishman who can get around him!" And in fact, a certain well-known English manufacturer had once visited the factory, but whether it was that Solomin could speak to him in his own tongue or that he was really impressed by his knowledge is uncertain; he had laughed, slapped him on the shoulder, and invited him to come to Liverpool with him, saying to the workmen, in his broken Russian, "Oh, he's all right, your man here!" At which the men laughed a great deal, not without a touch of pride. "So that's what he is! Our man!"

And he really was theirs and one of them. Early the next morning his favourite Pavel woke him, prepared his things for washing, told him various news, and asked him various questions. They partook of some tea together hastily, after which Solomin put on his grey, greasy working-jacket and set out for the factory; and his life began to go round again like some huge flywheel.

But the thread had to be broken again. Five days after Solomin's return home there drove into the courtyard a smart little phaeton, harnessed to

four splendid horses and a footman in pale green livery, whom Pavel conducted to the little wing, where he solemnly handed Solomin a letter sealed with an armorial crest, from "His Excellency Boris Andraevitch Sipiagin." In this letter, which exhaled an odour, not of perfume, but of some extraordinarily respectable English smell and was written in the third person, not by a secretary, but by the gentleman himself, the cultured owner of the village Arjanov, he begged to be excused for addressing himself to a man with whom he had not the honour of being personally acquainted, but of whom he, Sipiagin, had heard so many flattering accounts, and ventured to invite Mr. Solomin to come and see him at his house, as he very much wanted to ask his valuable advice about a manufacturing enterprise of some importance he had embarked upon. In the hope that Mr. Solomin would be kind enough to come, he, Sipiagin, had sent him his carriage, but in the event of his being unable to do so on that day, would he be kind enough to choose any other day that might be convenient for him and the same carriage would be gladly put at his disposal. Then followed the usual polite signature and a postscript written in the first person:

"I hope that you will not refuse to take dinner with us quite simply. No dress clothes." (The words "quite simply" were underlined.) Together with this letter the footman (not without a certain amount of embarrassment) gave Solomin another letter from Nejdanov. It was just a simple note, not sealed with wax but merely stuck down, containing the following lines: "Do please come. You're wanted badly and may be extremely useful. I need hardly say not to Mr. Sipiagin."

On finishing Sipiagin's letter Solomin thought, "How else can I go if not simply? I haven't any dress clothes at the factory… And what the devil should I drag myself over there for? It's just a waste of time!" But after reading Nejdanov's note, he scratched the back of his neck and walked over to the window, irresolute.

"What answer am I to take back, sir?" the footman in green livery asked slowly.

Solomin stood for some seconds longer at the window.

"I am coming with you," he announced, shaking back his hair and passing his hand over his forehead— "just let me get dressed."

The footman left the room respectfully and Solomin sent for Pavel, had a talk with him, ran across to the factory once more, then putting on a black coat with a very long waist, which had been made by a provincial tailor, and a shabby top-hat which instantly gave his face a wooden

expression, took his seat in the phaeton. He suddenly remembered that he had forgotten his gloves, and called out to the "never-failing" Pavel, who brought him a pair of newly-washed white kid ones, the fingers of which were so stretched at the tips that they looked like long biscuits. Solomin thrust the gloves into his pocket and gave the order to start. Then the footman jumped onto the box with an unnecessary amount of alacrity, the well-bred coachman sang out in a falsetto voice, and the horses started off at a gallop.

While the horses were bearing Solomin along to Sipiagin's, that gentleman was sitting in his drawing-room with a halfcut political pamphlet on his knee, discussing him with his wife. He confided to her that he had written to him with the express purpose of trying to get him away from the merchant's factory to his own, which was in a very bad way and needed reorganising. Sipiagin would not for a moment entertain the idea that Solomin would refuse to come, or even so much as appoint another day, though he had himself suggested it.

"But ours is a paper-mill, not a spinning-mill," Valentina Mihailovna remarked.

"It's all the same, my dear, machines are used in both, and he's a mechanic."

"But supposing he turns out to be a specialist!"

"My dear! In the first place there are no such things as specialists in Russia; in the second, I've told you that he's a mechanic!"

Valentina Mihailovna smiled.

"Do be careful, my dear. You've been unfortunate once already with young men; mind you don't make a second mistake."

"Are you referring to Nejdanov? I don't think I've been altogether mistaken with regard to him. He has been a good tutor to Kolia. And then you know "non bis in idem"! Excuse my being pedantic… . It means, things don't repeat themselves!

"Don't you think so? Well, I think that everything in the world repeats itself … especially what's in the nature of things… and particularly among young people."

"Que voulez-vous dire?" asked Sipiagin, flinging the pamphlet on the table with a graceful gesture of the hand.

"Ouvrez les yeux, et vous verrez!" Madame Sipiagina replied. They always spoke to one another in French.

"H'm!" Sipiagin grunted. "Are you referring to that student?"

"Yes, I'm referring to him."

"H'm! Has he got anything on here, eh?" (He passed his hand over his forehead.)

"Open your eyes!"

"Is it Mariana, eh?" (The second" eh" was pronounced more through the nose than the first one.)

"Open your eyes, I tell you!"

Sipiagin frowned.

"We must talk about this later on. I should just like to say now that this Solomin may feel rather uncomfortable… You see, he is not used to society. We must be nice to him so as to make him feel at his ease. Of course, I don't mean this for you, you're such a dear, that I think you could fascinate anyone if you chose. J'en sais quelque chose, madame! I mean this for the others, if only for—"

He pointed to a fashionable grey hat lying on a shelf. It belonged to Mr. Kollomietzev, who had been in Arjanov since the morning.

"Il est tres cassant you know. He has far too great a contempt for the people for my liking. And he has been so frightfully quarrelsome and irritable of late. Is his little affair there not getting on well?"

Sipiagin nodded his head in some indefinite direction, but his wife understood him.

"Open your eyes, I tell you again!"

Sipiagin stood up.

"Eh?" (This "eh" was pronounced in a quite different tone, much lower.) "Is that how the land lies? They had better take care I don't open them too wide!"

"That is your own affair, my dear. But as for that new young man of yours, you may be quite easy about him. I will see that everything is all right. Every precaution will be taken."

It turned out that no precautions were necessary, however. Solomin was not in the least alarmed or embarrassed.

As soon as he was announced Sipiagin jumped up, exclaiming in a voice loud enough to be heard in the hall, "Show him in, of course show him in!" He then went up to the drawing-room door and stood waiting. No sooner had Solomin crossed the threshold, almost knocking against

Sipiagin, when the latter extended both his hands, saying with an amiable smile and a friendly shake of the head, "How very nice of you to come… . I can hardly thank you enough." Then he led him up to Valentina Mihailovna.

"Allow me to introduce you to my wife," he said, gently pressing his hand against Solomin's back, pushing him towards her as it were. "My dear, here is our best local engineer and manufacturer, Vassily… Fedosaitch Solomin."

Madame Sipiagina stood up, raised her wonderful eyelashes, smiled sweetly as to an acquaintance, extended her hand with the palm upwards, her elbow pressed against her waist, her head bent a little to the right, in the attitude of a suppliant. Solomin let the husband and wife go through their little comedy, shook hands with them both, and sat down at the first invitation to do so. Sipiagin began to fuss about him, asking if he would like anything, but Solomin assured him that he wanted nothing and was not in the least bit tired from the journey.

"Then may we go to the factory?" Sipiagin asked, a little shame- faced, not daring to believe in so much condescension on the part of his guest.

"As soon as you like, I'm quite ready," Solomin replied. "How awfully good of you! Shall we drive or would you like to walk?"

"Is it a long way?"

"About half a mile."

"It's hardly worthwhile bringing out the carriage."

"Very well. Ivan! my hat and stick! Make haste! And you'll see about some dinner, little one, won't you? My hat, quick!"

Sipiagin was far more excited than his visitor, and calling out once more, " Why don't they give me my hat," he, the stately dignitary, rushed out like a frolicsome schoolboy. While her husband was talking to Solomin, Valentina Mihailovna looked at him stealthily, trying to make out this new "young man." He was sitting in an armchair, quite at his ease, his bare hands laid on his knee (he had not put on the gloves after all), calmly, although not without a certain amount of curiosity, looking around at the furniture and pictures. "I don't understand," she thought, "he's a plebeian—quite a plebeian—and yet behaves so naturally!" Solomin did indeed carry himself naturally, not with any view to effect, as much as to say "Look what a splendid fellow I am!" but as a man whose thoughts and feelings are simple, direct, and strong at the same time.

Madame Sipiagina wanted to say something to him, but was surprised to find that she did not quite know how to begin.

"Heavens!" she thought. "This mechanic is making me quite nervous!"

"My husband must be very grateful to you," she remarked at last. "It was so good of you to sacrifice a few hours of your valuable time—"

"My time is not so very valuable, madame," he observed. "Besides, I've not come here for long."

"Voila ou l'ours a montre sa patte," she thought in French, but at this moment her husband appeared in the doorway, his hat on his head and a walking stick in his hand.

"Are you ready, Vassily Fedosaitch?" he asked in a free and easy tone, half turned towards him.

Solomin rose, bowed to Valentina Mihailovna, and walked out behind Sipiagin.

"This way, this way, Vassily Fedosaitch!" Sipiagin called out, just as if they were groping their way through a tangled forest and Solomin needed a guide. "This way! Do be careful, there are some steps here, Vassily Fedosaitch!"

"If you want to call me by my father's Christian name," Solomin said slowly, "then it isn't Fedosaitch, but Fedotitch."

Sipiagin was taken aback and looked at him over his shoulder.

"I'm so sorry, Vassily Fedotitch."

"Please don't mention it."

As soon as they got outside they ran against Kollomietzev.

"Where are you off to?" the latter asked, looking askance at Solomin. "Are you going to the factory? C'est la l'individu en question?"

Sipiagin opened his eyes wide and shook his head slightly by way of warning.

"Yes, we're going to the factory. I want to show all my sins and transgressions to this gentleman, who is an engineer. Allow me to introduce you. Mr. Kollomietzev, a neighbouring landowner, Mr. Solomin.

Kollomietzev nodded his head twice in an off-hand manner without looking at Solomin, but the latter looked at him and there was a sinister gleam in his half-closed eyes.

"May I come with you?" Kollomietzev asked. "You know I'm always ready to learn."

"Certainly, if you like."

They went out of the courtyard into the road and had scarcely taken twenty steps when they ran across a priest in a woven cassock, who was wending his way homeward. Kollomietzev left his two companions and, going up to him with long, firm strides, asked for his blessing and gave him a sounding smack on his moist, red hand, much to the discomfiture of the priest, who did not in the least expect this sort of outburst. He then turned to Solomin and gave him a defiant look. He had evidently heard something about him and wanted to show off and get some fun out of this learned scoundrel.

"C'est une manifestation, mon cher?" Sipiagin muttered through his teeth.

Kollomietzev giggled.

"Oui, mon cher, une manifestation necessaire par temps qui court!"

They got to the factory and were met by a Little Russian with an enormous beard and false teeth, who had taken the place of the former manager, a German, whom Sipiagin had dismissed. This man was there in a temporary capacity and understood absolutely nothing; he merely kept on saying "Just so… yes… that's it," and sighing all the time. They began inspecting the place. Several of the workmen knew Solomin by sight and bowed to him. He even called out to one of them, "Hallo, Gregory! You here?" Solomin was soon convinced that the place was going badly. Money was simply thrown away for no reason whatever. The machines turned out to be of a very poor kind; many of them were quite superfluous and a great many necessary ones were lacking. Sipiagin kept looking into Solomin's face, trying to guess his opinion, asked a few timid questions, wanted to know if he was at any rate satisfied with the order of the place.

"Oh, the order is all right," Solomin replied, "but I doubt if you can get anything out of it."

Not only Sipiagin, but even Kollomietzev felt, that in the factory Solomin was quite at home, was familiar with every little detail, was master there in fact. He laid his hand on a machine as a rider on his horse's neck; he poked a wheel with his finger and it either stood still or began whirling round; he took some paper pulp out of a vat and it instantly revealed all its defects.

Solomin said very little, took no notice of the Little Russian at all, and went out without saying anything. Sipiagin and Kollomietzev followed him.

Sipiagin was so upset that he did not let any one accompany him. He stamped and ground his teeth with rage.

"I can see by your face," he said turning to Solomin, "that you are not pleased with the place. Of course, I know that it's not in a very excellent condition and doesn't pay as yet. But please … give me your candid opinion as to what you consider to be the principal failings and as to what one could do to improve matters."

"Paper-manufacturing is not in my line," Solomin began, "but I can tell you one thing. I doubt if the aristocracy is cut out for industrial enterprises."

"Do you consider it degrading for the aristocracy?" Kollomietzev asked.

Solomin smiled his habitual broad smile.

"Oh dear no! What is there degrading about it? And even if there were, I don't think the aristocracy would be overly particular."

"What do you mean?"

"I only meant," Solomin continued, calmly, "that the gentry are not used to that kind of business. A knowledge of commerce is needed for that; everything has to be put on a different footing, you want technical training for it. The gentry don't understand this. We see them starting woollen, cotton, and other factories all over the place, but they nearly always fall into the hands of the merchants in the end. It's a pity, because the merchants are even worse sweaters. But it can't be helped, I suppose."

"To listen to you one would think that all questions of finance were above our nobility!" Kollomietzev exclaimed.

"Oh no! On the other hand the nobility are masters at it. For getting concessions for railways, founding banks, exempting themselves from some tax, or anything like that, there is no one to beat them! They make huge fortunes. I hinted at that just now, but it seemed to offend you. I had regular industrial enterprises in my mind when I spoke; I say regular, because founding private public houses, petty little grocers' shops, or lending the peasants corn or money at a hundred or a hundred and fifty percent, as many of our landed gentry are now doing, I cannot consider as genuine financial enterprises."

Kollomietzev did not say anything. He belonged to that new species of money-lending landlord whom Markelov had mentioned in his last talk with Nejdanov, and was the more inhuman in his demands that he had no personal dealings with the peasants themselves. He never allowed them into his perfumed European study, and conducted all his business with them through his manager. He was boiling with rage while listening to Solomin's slow, impartial speech, but he held his peace; only the working of the muscles of his face betrayed what was passing within him.

"But allow me, Vassily Fedotitch," Sipiagin began; "what you have just said may have been quite true in former days, when the nobility had quite different privileges and were altogether in a different position; but now, after all the beneficial reforms in our present industrial age, why should not the nobility turn their attention and bring their abilities into enterprises of this nature? Why shouldn't they be able to understand what is understood by a simple illiterate merchant? They are not suffering from lack of education and one might even claim, without any exaggeration, that they are, in a certain sense, the representatives of enlightenment and progress."

Boris Andraevitch spoke very well; his eloquence would have made a great stir in St. Petersburg, in his department, or maybe in higher quarters, but it produced no effect whatever on Solomin.

"The nobility cannot manage these things," Solomin repeated.

"But why, I should like to know? Why?" Kollomietzev almost shouted.

"Because there is too much of the bureaucrat about them."

"Bureaucrat?" Kollomietzev laughed maliciously. "I don't think you quite realise what you're saying, Mr. Solomin."

Solomin continued smiling.

"What makes you think so, Mr. Kolomentzev?" (Kollomietzev shuddered at hearing his name thus mutilated.) "I assure you that I always realise what I am saying."

"Then please explain what you meant just now!"

"With pleasure. I think that every bureaucrat is an outsider and was always such. The nobility have now become 'outsiders.'"

Kollomietzev laughed louder than ever.

"But, my dear sir, I really don't understand what you mean!"

"So much the worse for you. Perhaps you will if you try hard enough."

"Sir!

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," Sipiagin interposed hastily, trying to catch someone's eye, "please, please … Kallomeitzeff, je vous prie de vous calmer. I suppose dinner will soon be ready. Come along, gentlemen!"

"Valentina Mihailovna!" Kollomietzev cried out five minutes later, rushing into her boudoir. "I really don't know what your husband is doing! He has brought us one nihilist and now he's bringing us another! Only this one is much worse!"

"But why?"

"He is advocating the most awful things, and what do you think? He has been talking to your husband for a whole hour, and not once, not once, did he address him as Your Excellency! Le vagabond!"

Chapter 24

JUST before dinner Sipiagin called his wife into the library. He wanted to have a talk with her alone. He seemed worried. He told her that the factory was really in a bad way, that Solomin struck him as a capable man, although a little stiff, and thought it was necessary to continue being aux petits soins with him.

"How I should like to get hold of him!" he repeated once or twice. Sipiagin was very much annoyed at Kollomietzev's being there. "Devil take the man! He sees nihilists everywhere and is always wanting to suppress them! Let him do it at his own house I He simply can't hold his tongue!"

Valentina Mihailovna said that she would be delighted to be aux petits soins with the new visitor, but it seemed to her that he had no need of these petits soins and took no notice of them; not rudely in any way, but he was quite indifferent; very remarkable in a man du commun.

"Never mind… . Be nice to him just the same!" Sipiagin begged of her.

Valentina Mihailovna promised to do what he wanted and fulfilled her promise conscientiously. She began by having a tete-a-tete with Kollomietzev. What she said to him remains a secret, but he came to the table with the air of a man who had made up his mind to be discreet and submissive at all costs. This "resignation" gave his whole bearing a slight touch of melancholy; and what dignity … oh, what dignity there was in every one of his movements! Valentina Mihailovna introduced Solomin to everybody (he looked more attentively at Mariana than at any of the others), and made him sit beside her on her right at table. Kollomietzev sat on her left, and as he unfolded his serviette screwed up his face and smiled, as much as to say, "Well, now let us begin our little comedy!" Sipiagin sat on the opposite side and watched him with some anxiety. By a new arrangement of Madame Sipiagina, Nejdanov was not put next to Mariana as usual, but between Anna Zaharovna and Sipiagin. Mariana found her card (as the dinner was a stately one) on her serviette between

Kollomietzev and Kolia. The dinner was excellently served; there was even a "menu"—a painted card lay before each person.

Directly soup was finished, Sipiagin again brought the conversation round to his factory, and from there went on to Russian manufacture in general. Solomin, as usual, replied very briefly. As soon as he began speaking, Mariana fixed her eyes upon him. Kollomietzev, who was sitting beside her, turned to her with various compliments (he had been asked not to start a dispute), but she did not listen to him; and indeed he pronounced all his pleasantries in a half-hearted manner, merely to satisfy his own conscience. He realised that there was something between himself and this young girl that could not be crossed.

As for Nejdanov, something even worse had come to pass between him and the master of the house. For Sipiagin, Nejdanov had become simply a piece of furniture, or an empty space that he quite ignored. These new relations had taken place so quickly and unmistakably that when Nejdanov pronounced a few words in answer to a remark of Anna Zaharovna's, Sipiagin looked round in amazement, as if wondering where the sound came from.

Sipiagin evidently possessed some of the characteristics for which certain of the great Russian bureaucrats are celebrated for.

After the fish, Valentina Mihailovna, who had been lavishing all her charms on Solomin, said to her husband in English that she noticed their visitor did not drink wine and might perhaps like some beer. Sipiagin called aloud for ale, while Solomin calmly turned towards Valentina Mihailovna, saying, "You may not be aware, madame, that I spent over two years in England and can understand and speak English. I only mentioned it in case you should wish to say anything private before me." Valentina Mihailovna laughed and assured him that this precaution was altogether unnecessary, since he would hear nothing but good of himself; inwardly she thought Solomin's action rather strange, but delicate in its own way.

At this point Kollomietzev could no longer contain himself. "And so you've been in England," he began, "and no doubt studied the manners and customs there. Do you think them worth imitating?"

"Some yes, others no."

"Brief but not clear," Kollomietzev remarked, trying not to notice the signs Sipiagin was making to him. "You were speaking of the nobility this morning… No doubt you've had the opportunity of studying the English landed gentry, as they call them there."

"No, I had no such opportunity. I moved in quite a different sphere. But I formed my own ideas about these gentlemen."

"Well, do you think that such a landed gentry is impossible among us? Or that we ought not to want it in any case?"

"In the first place, I certainly do think it impossible, and in the second, it's hardly worthwhile wanting such a thing."

"But why, my dear sir? " Kollomietzev asked; the polite tone was intended to soothe Sipiagin, who sat very uneasily on his chair.

"Because in twenty or thirty years your landed gentry won't be here in any case."

"What makes you think so?"

"Because by that time the land will fall into the hands of people in no way distinguished by their origin."

"Do you mean the merchants?"

"For the most part probably the merchants."

"But how will it happen?"

"They'll buy it, of course."

"From the gentry? "

"Yes; from the gentry."

Kollomietzev smiled condescendingly. "If you recollect you said the very same thing about factories that you're now saying about the land."

"And it's quite true."

"You will no doubt be very pleased about it!"

"Not at all. I've already told you that the people won't be any the better off for the change."

Kollomietzev raised his hand slightly. "What solicitude on the part of the people, imagine!"

"Vassily Fedotitch!" Sipiagin called out as loudly as he could, "they have brought you some beer! Voyons, simeon!" he added in an undertone.

But Kollomietzev would not be suppressed.

"I see you haven't a very high opinion of the merchant class," he began again, turning to Solomin, "but they've sprung from the people."

"So they have."

"I thought that you considered everything about the people, or relating to the people, as above criticism!"

"Not at all! You are quite mistaken. The masses can be condemned for a great many things, though they are not always to blame. Our merchant is an exploiter and uses his capital for that purpose. He thinks that people are always trying to get the better of him, so he tries to get the better of them. But the people—"

"Well, what about the people?" Kollomietzev asked in falsetto.

"The people are asleep."

"And would you like to wake them?"

"That would not be a bad thing to do."

"Aha! aha! So that's what—"

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" Sipiagin exclaimed imperatively. He felt that the moment had come to put an end to the discussion, and he did put an end to it. With a slight gesture of his right hand, while the elbow remained propped on the table, he delivered a long and detailed speech. He praised the conservatives on the one hand and approved of the liberals on the other, giving the preference to the latter as he counted himself of their numbers. He spoke highly of the people, but drew attention to some of their weaknesses; expressed his full confidence in the government, but asked himself whether all its officials were faithfully fulfilling its benevolent designs. He acknowledged the importance of literature, but declared that without the utmost caution it was dangerous. He turned to the West with hope, then became doubtful; he turned to the East, first sighed, then became enthusiastic. Finally he proposed a toast in honour of the trinity: Religion, Agriculture, and Industry!

"Under the wing of authority!" Kollomietzev added sternly.

"Under the wing of wise and benevolent authority," Sipiagin corrected him.

The toast was drunk in silence. The empty space on Sipiagin's left, in the form of Nejdanov, did certainly make several sounds of disapproval; but arousing not the least attention became quiet again, and the dinner, without any further controversy, reached a happy conclusion.

Valentina Mihailovna, with a most charming smile, handed Solomin a cup of coffee; he drank it and was already looking round for his hat when Sipiagin took him gently by the arm and led him into his study. There he first gave him an excellent cigar and then made him a proposal to enter his factory on the most advantageous terms. "You will be

absolute master there, Vassily Fedotitch, I assure you!" Solomin accepted the cigar and declined the offer about the factory. He stuck to his refusal, however much Sipiagin insisted.

"Please don't say 'no' at once, my dear Vassily Fedotitch! Say, at least, that you'll think it over until tomorrow!"

"It would make no difference. I wouldn't accept your proposal."

"Do think it over till tomorrow, Vassily Fedotitch! It won't cost you anything."

Solomin agreed, came out of the study, and began looking for his hat again. But Nejdanov, who until that moment had had no opportunity of exchanging a word with him, came up to him and whispered hurriedly:

"For heaven's sake don't go yet, or else we won't be able to have a talk!"

Solomin left his hat alone, the more readily as Sipiagin, who had observed his irresoluteness, exclaimed:

"Won't you stay the night with us?"

"As you wish."

The grateful glance Mariana fixed on him as she stood at the drawing-room window set him thinking.

Chapter 25

UNTIL his visit Mariana had pictured Solomin to herself as quite different. At first sight he had struck her as undefined, characterless. She had seen many such fair, lean, sinewy men in her day, but the more she watched him, the longer she listened to him, the stronger grew her feeling of confidence in him—for it was confidence he inspired her with. This calm, not exactly clumsy, but heavy man, was not only incapable of lying or bragging, but one could rely on him as on a stone wall. He would not betray one; more than that, he would understand and help one. It seemed to Mariana that he aroused such a feeling, not only in herself alone, but in everyone present. The things he spoke about had no particular interest for her. She attached very little significance to all this talk about factories and merchants, but the way in which he spoke, the manner in which he looked round and smiled, pleased her immensely.

A straightforward man … at any rate! this was what appealed to her. It is a well-known fact, though not very easy to understand, that Russians are the greatest liars on the face of the earth, yet there is nothing they respect more than truth, nothing they sympathise with more. And then Solomin, in Mariana's eyes, was surrounded by a particular halo, as a man who had been recommended by Vassily Nikolaevitch himself. During dinner she had exchanged glances with Nejdanov several times on his account, and in the end found herself involuntarily comparing the two, not to Nejdanov's advantage. Nejdanov's face was, it is true, handsomer and pleasanter to look at than Solomin's, but the very face expressed a medley of troubled sensations: embarrassment, annoyance, impatience, and even dejection.

He seemed to be sitting on hot coals; tried to speak, but did not, and laughed nervously. Solomin, on the other hand, seemed a little bored, but looked quite at home and utterly independent of what was going on around him. "We must certainly ask advice of this man," Mariana thought, "he is sure to tell us something useful." It was she who had sent Nejdanov to him after dinner.

The evening went very slowly; fortunately dinner was not over until late and not very long remained before bedtime. Kollomietzev was sulky and said nothing.

"What is the matter with you? " Madame Sipiagina asked half- jestingly. "Have you lost anything?"

"Yes, I have," Kollomietzev replied. "There is a story about a certain officer in the lifeguards who was very much grieved that his soldiers had lost a sock of his. 'Find me my sock!' he would say to them, and I say, find me the word 'sir!' The word ' sir' is lost, and with it every sense of respect towards rank!"

Madame Sipiagina informed Kollomietzev that she would not help him in the search.

Emboldened by the success of his speech at dinner, Sipiagin delivered two others, in which he let fly various statesmanlike reflections about indispensable measures and various words—des mots—not so much witty as weighty, which he had especially prepared for St. Petersburg. He even repeated one of these words, saying beforehand, "If you will allow the expression." Above all, he declared that a certain minister had an "idle, unconcentrated mind," and was given "to dreaming." And not forgetting that one of his listener's was a man of the people, he lost no opportunity in trying to show that he too was a Russian through and through, and steeped in the very root of the national life! For instance, to Kollomietzev's remark that the rain might interfere with the haymaking, he replied, "If the hay is black, then the buckwheat will be white;" then he made use of various proverbs like: "A store without a master is an orphan," "Look before you leap," "When there's bread then there's economy," " If the birch leaves are as big as farthings by St. Yegor's day, the dough can be put into tubs by the feast of Our Lady of Kazan." He sometimes went wrong, however, and would get his proverbs very much mixed; but the society in which these little slips occurred did not even suspect that notre bon Russe had made a mistake, and, thanks to Prince Kovrishkin, it had got used to such little blunders. Sipiagin pronounced all these proverbs in a peculiarly powerful, gruff voice—d'une voix rustique. Similar sayings let loose at the proper time and place in St. Petersburg would cause influential high-society ladies to exclaim, "Comme il connait bien les moeurs de notre people!" and great statesmen would add, "Les moeurs et les besoins!"

Valentina Mihailovna fussed about Solomin as much as she could, but her failure to arouse him disheartened her. On passing Kollomietzev she

said involuntarily, in an undertone: "Mon Dieu, que je me sens fatiguee!" to which he replied with an ironical bow: "Tu l'as voulu, George Daudin!"

At last, after the usual outburst of politeness and amiability, which appears on the faces of a bored assembly on the point of breaking up, after sudden handshakings and friendly smiles, the weary guests and weary hosts separated.

Solomin, who had been given almost the best bedroom on the second floor, with English toilette accessories and a bathroom attached, went in to Nejdanov.

The latter began by thanking him heartily for having agreed to stay.

"I know it's a sacrifice on your part—"

"Not at all," Solomin said hastily. "There was no sort of sacrifice required. Besides I couldn't refuse you."

"Why not?"

"Because I've taken a great liking to you."

Nejdanov was surprised and glad at the same time, while Solomin pressed his hand. Then he seated himself astride on a chair, lighted a cigar, and leaning both his elbows against the back, began:

"Now tell me what's the matter."

Nejdanov also seated himself astride on a chair in front of Solomin, but did not light a cigar.

"So you want to know what's the matter… The fact is, I want to run away from here."

"Am I to understand that you want to leave this house? As far as I can see there is nothing to prevent you.

"Not leave it, but run away from it."

"Why? Do they want to detain you? Perhaps you've taken some money in advance … If so, you've only to say the word and I should be delighted—"

"I'm afraid you don't understand me, my dear Solomin. "I said run away and not leave, because I'm not going away alone."

Solomin raised his head.

"With whom then?"

"With the girl you've seen here today."

"With her! She has a very nice face. Are you in love with one another? Or have you simply decided to go away together because you don't like being here?"

"We love each other."

Ah!" Solomin was silent for a while. "Is she related to the people here?"

"Yes. But she fully shares our convictions and is prepared for anything."

Solomin smiled.

"And you, Nejdanov, are you prepared?"

Nejdanov frowned slightly.

"Why ask? You will see when the time comes."

"I do not doubt you, Nejdanov. I only asked because it seemed to me that besides yourself nobody else was prepared."

"And Markelov?"

"Why, of course, Markelov! But then, he was born prepared."

At this moment someone knocked at the door gently, but hastily, and opened it without waiting for an answer. It was Mariana. She immediately came up to Solomin.

"I feel sure," she began, "that you are not surprised at seeing me here at this time of night. He" (Mariana pointed to Nejdanov) "has no doubt told you everything. Give me your hand, please, and believe me an honest girl is standing before you."

"I am convinced of that," Solomin said seriously.

He had risen from his chair as soon as Mariana had appeared. "I had already noticed you at table and was struck by the frank expression of your eyes. Nejdanov told me about your intentions. But may I ask why you want to run away."

"What a question! The cause with which I am fully in sympathy … don't be surprised. Nejdanov has kept nothing from me… The great work is about to begin … and am I to remain in this house, where everything is deceit and falsehood? People I love will be exposed to danger, and I—"

Solomin stopped her by a wave of the hand.

"Calm yourself. Sit down, please, and you sit down too, Nejdanov. Let us all sit down. Listen to me! If you have no other reason than the one you have mentioned, then there's no need for you to run away as yet.

The work will not begin so soon as you seem to anticipate. A little more prudent consideration is needed in this matter. It's no good plunging in too soon, believe me."

Mariana sat down and wrapped herself up in a large plaid, which she had thrown over her shoulders.

"But I can't stay here any longer! I am being insulted by everybody. Only today that idiot Anna Zaharovna said before Kolia, alluding to my father, that a bad tree does not bring forth good fruit! Kolia was even surprised, and asked what it meant. Not to speak of Valentina Mihailovna!"

Solomin stopped her again, this time with a smile.

Mariana felt that he was laughing at her a little, but this smile could not have offended any one.

"But, my dear lady, I don't know who Anna Zaharovna is, nor what tree you are talking about. A foolish woman says some foolish things to you and you can't endure it! How will you live in that case? The whole world is composed of fools. Your reason is not good enough. Have you any other?"

"I am convinced," Nejdanov interposed in a hollow voice, "that Mr. Sipiagin will turn me out of the house tomorrow of his own accord. Someone must have told him. He treats me … in the most contemptuous manner."

Solomin turned to Nejdanov.

"If that's the case, then why run away?"

Nejdanov did not know what to say.

"But I've already told you—," he began.

"He said that," Mariana put in, "because I am going with him."

Solomin looked at her and shook his head good-naturedly.

"In that case, my dear lady, I say again, that if you want to leave here because you think the revolution is about to break out—"

"That was precisely why we asked you to come," Mariana interrupted him; "we wanted to find out exactly how matters stood."

"If that's your reason for going," Solomin continued, "I repeat once more, you can stay at home for some time to come yet, but if you want to run away because you love each other and can't be united otherwise, then—"

"Well? What then?"

"Then I must first congratulate you and, if need be, give you all the help in my power. I may say, my dear lady, that I took a liking to you both at first sight and love you as brother and sister."

Mariana and Nejdanov both went up to him on the right and left and each clasped a hand.

"Only tell us what to do," Mariana implored. "Supposing the revolution is still far off, there must be preparatory work to be done, a thing impossible in this house, in the midst of these surroundings. We should so gladly go together… Show us what we can do; tell us where to go… Send us anywhere you like! You will send us, won't you?"

"Where to?

"To the people… . Where can one go if not among the people?"

"Into the forest," Nejdanov thought, calling to mind Paklin's words.

Solomin looked intently at Mariana.

"Do you want to know the people?"

"Yes; that is, we not only want to get to know them, but we want to work … to toil for them."

"Very well. I promise you that you shall get to know them. I will give you the opportunity of doing as you wish. And you, Nejdanov, are you ready to go for her … and for them?"

"Of course I am," he said hastily. "Juggernaut," another word of Paklin's, flashed across his mind. "Here it comes thundering along, the huge chariot … I can hear the crash and rumble of its wheels."

"Very well," Solomin repeated pensively. "But when do you want to go away?"

"Tomorrow, if possible," Mariana observed.

"Very good. But where?"

"Sh, sh—" Nejdanov whispered. "Someone is walking along the corridor."

They were all silent for a time.

"But where do you want to go to? " Solomin asked again, lowering his voice.

"We don't know," Mariana replied.

Solomin glanced at Nejdanov, but the latter merely shook his head.

Solomin stretched out his hand and carefully snuffed the candle.

"I tell you what, my children," he said at last, "come to me at the factory. It's not beautiful there, but safe, at any rate. I will hide you. I have a little spare room there. Nobody will find you. If only you get there, we won't give you up. You might think that there are far too many people about, but that's one of its good points. Where there is a crowd it's easy to hide. Will you come? Will you?"

"How can we thank you enough!" Nejdanov exclaimed, whilst Mariana, who was at first a little taken aback by the idea of the factory, added quickly:

"Of course, of course! How good of you! But you won't leave us there long, will you? You will send us on, won't you?"

"That will depend entirely on yourselves… If you should want to get married that could also be arranged at the factory. I have a neighbour there close by—a cousin of mine, a priest, and very friendly. He would marry you with the greatest of pleasure."

Mariana smiled to herself, while Nejdanov again pressed Solomin's hand.

"But I say, won't your employer, the owner of the factory, be annoyed about it. Won't he make it unpleasant for you?" he asked after a pause.

Solomin looked askance at Nejdanov.

"Oh, don't bother about me! It's quite unnecessary. So long as things at the factory go on all right it's all the same to my employer. You need neither of you fear the least unpleasantness. And you need not be afraid of the workpeople either. Only let me know what time to expect you."

Nejdanov and Mariana exchanged glances.

"The day after tomorrow, early in the morning, or the day after that. We can't wait any longer. As likely as not they'll tell me to go tomorrow."

"Well then," Solomin said, rising from his chair. "I'll wait for you every morning. I won't leave the place for the rest of the week. Every precaution will be taken."

Mariana drew near to him (she was on her way to the door). "Goodbye, my dear kind Vassily Fedotitch … that is your name, isn't it? "

"That's right."

"Goodbye till we meet again. And thank you so much!"

"Goodbye, good night!"

"Goodbye, Nejdanov; till tomorrow," she added, and went out quickly.

The young men remained for some time motionless, and both were silent.

"Nejdanov … " Solomin began at last, and stopped. "Nejdanov… " he began a second time, "tell me about this girl … tell me everything you can. What has her life been until now? Who is she? Why is she here?"

Nejdanov told Solomin briefly what he knew about her. "Nejdanov," he said at last, "you must take great care of her, because … if … anything … were to happen, you would be very much to blame. Goodbye."

He went out, while Nejdanov stood still for a time in the middle of the room, and muttering, "Oh dear! It's better not to think!" threw himself face downwards on the bed.

When Mariana returned to her room she found a note on the table containing the following:

"I am sorry for you. You are ruining yourself. Think what you are doing. Into what abysses are you throwing yourself with your eyes shut. For whom and for what?—V."

There was a peculiarly fine fresh scent in the room; evidently Valentina Mihailovna had only just left it. Mariana took a pen and wrote underneath: "You need not be sorry for me. God knows which of us two is more in need of pity. I only know that I wouldn't like to be in your place for worlds.—M." She put the note on the table, not doubting that it would fall into Valentina Mihailovna's hand.

On the following morning, Solomin, after seeing Nejdanov and definitely declining to undertake the management of Sipiagin's factory, set out for home. He mused all the way home, a thing that rarely occurred with him; the motion of the carriage usually had a drowsy effect on him. He thought of Mariana and of Nejdanov; it seemed to him that if he had been in love—he, Solomin—he would have had quite a different air, would have looked and spoken differently. "But," he thought, "such a thing has never happened to me, so I can't tell what sort of an air I would have." He recalled an Irish girl whom he had once seen in a shop behind a counter; recalled her wonderful black hair, blue eyes, and thick lashes, and how she had looked at him with a sad, wistful expression, and how he had paced up and down the street before her window for a long time, how excited he had been, and had kept asking himself if he should try and get to know her. He was in London at the time, where he had been sent by his employer with a sum of money to make various purchases.

He very nearly decided to remain in London and send back the money, so strong was the impression produced on him by the beautiful Polly. (He had got to know her name, one of the other girls had called her by it.) He had mastered himself, however, and went back to his employer. Polly was more beautiful than Mariana, but Mariana had the same sad, wistful expression in her eyes … and Mariana was a Russian.

"But what am I doing? " Solomin exclaimed in an undertone, "bothering about other men's brides!" and he shook back the collar of his coat, as if he wanted to shake off all superfluous thoughts. Just then he drove up to the factory and caught sight of the faithful Pavel in the doorway of his little dwelling.

Chapter 26

SOLOMIN'S refusal greatly offended Sipiagin; so much so, that he suddenly found that this home-bred Stevenson was not such a wonderful engineer after all, and that though he was not perhaps a complete poser, yet gave himself airs like the plebeian he was. "All these Russians when they imagine they know a thing become insufferable! Au fond Kollomietzev was right!" Under the influence of such hostile and irritable sensations, the statesman—en herbe—was even more unsympathetic and distant in his intercourse with Nejdanov. He told Kolia that he need not take lessons that day and that he must try to be more independent in future. He did not, however, dismiss the tutor himself as the latter had expected, but continued to ignore him. But Valentina Mihailovna did not ignore Mariana. A dreadful scene took place between them.

About two hours before dinner they suddenly found themselves alone in the drawing-room. They both felt that the inevitable moment for the battle had arrived and, after a moment's hesitation, instinctively drew near to one another. Valentina Mihailovna was slightly smiling, Mariana pressed her lips firmly together; both were pale. When walking across the room, Valentina Mihailovna looked uneasily to the right and left and tore off a geranium leaf. Mariana's eyes were fixed straight on the smiling face coming towards her. Madame Sipiagina was the first to stop, and drumming her finger-tips on the back of a chair began in a free and easy tone:

"Mariana Vikentievna, it seems that we have entered upon a correspondence with one another … Living under the same roof as we do it strikes me as being rather strange. And you know I am not very fond of strange things."

"I did not begin the correspondence, Valentina Mihailovna."

"That is true. As it happens, I am to blame in that. Only I could not think of any other means of arousing in you a feeling … how shall I say? A feeling—"

"You can speak quite plainly, Valentina Mihailovna. You need not be afraid of offending me."

"A feeling … of propriety."

Valentina Mihailovna ceased; nothing but the drumming of her fingers could be heard in the room.

"In what way do you think I have failed to observe the rules of propriety?" Mariana asked.

Valentina Mihailovna shrugged her shoulders.

"Ma chere, vous n'etes plus un enfant—I think you know what I mean. Do you suppose that your behaviour could have remained a secret to me, to Anna Zaharovna, to the whole household in fact? However, I must say you are not over-particular about secrecy. You simply acted in bravado. Only Boris Andraevitch does not know what you have done … But he is occupied with far more serious and important matters. Apart from him, everybody else knows, everybody!"

Mariana's pallor increased.

"I must ask you to express yourself more clearly, Valentina Mihailovna. What is it you are displeased about?"

"L'insolente!" Madame Sipiagina thought, but contained herself.

"Do you want to know why I am displeased with you, Mariana? Then I must tell you that I disapprove of your prolonged interviews with a young man who is very much beneath you in birth, breeding, and social position. I am displeased … no! this word is far too mild—I am shocked at your late … your night visits to this young man! And where does it happen? Under my own roof! Perhaps you see nothing wrong in it and think that it has nothing to do with me, that I should be silent and thereby screen your disgraceful conduct. As an honourable woman… oui, mademoiselle, je l'ai ete, je le suis, et je le serai tu'jours! I can't help being horrified at such proceedings!"

Valentina Mihailovna threw herself into an armchair as if overcome by her indignation. Mariana smiled for the first time.

"I do not doubt your honour— past, present, and to come," she began; "and I mean this quite sincerely. Your indignation is needless. I have brought no shame on your house. The young man whom you alluded to … yes, I have certainly … fallen in love with him."

"You love Mr. Nejdanov?"

"Yes, I love him."

Valentina Mihailovna sat up straight in her chair.

"But, Mariana! he's only a student, of no birth, no family, and he is younger than you are!" (These words were pronounced not without a certain spiteful pleasure.) "What earthly good can come of it? What do you see in him? He is only an empty-headed boy."

"That was not always your opinion of him, Valentina Mihailovna."

"For heaven's sake leave me out of the question, my dear! … Pas tant d'esprit que ca, je vous prie. The thing concerns you and your future. Just consider for a moment. What sort of a match is this for you?"

"I must confess, Valentina Mihailovna, that I did not look at it in that light."

"What? What did you say? What am I to think? Let us assume that you followed the dictates of your heart, but then it must end in marriage sometime or other."

"I don't know … I had not thought of that."

"You had not thought of that? You must be mad!"

Mariana turned away.

"Let us make an end of this conversation, Valentina Mihailovna. It won't lead to anything. In any case we won't understand each other."

Valentina Mihailovna started up.

"I can't, I won't put an end to this conversation! It's far too serious … I am responsible for you before … "

Valentina Mihailovna was going to say God, but hesitated and added, "before the whole world! I can't be silent when I hear such utter madness! And why can't I understand you, pray? What insufferable pride these young people have nowadays! On the contrary, I understand you only too well … I can see that you are infected with these new ideas, which will only be your ruin. It will be too late to turn back then."

"Maybe; but believe me, even if we perish, we will not so much as stretch out a finger that you might save us!"

"Pride again! This awful pride! But listen, Mariana, listen to me," she added, suddenly changing her tone. She wanted to draw Mariana nearer to herself, but the latter stepped back a pace. "Ecoutez-moi, je vous en conjure! After all, I am not so old nor so stupid that it should be impossible for us to understand each other! Je ne suis pas une encroutee. I was even considered a republican as a girl . . no less than you. Listen, I won't pretend that I ever had any motherly feeling towards you … and it

is not in your nature to complain of that … But I always felt, and feel now, that I owed certain duties towards you, and I have always endeavoured to fulfil them. Perhaps the match I had in my mind for you, for which both Boris Andraevitch and I would have been ready to make any sacrifice … may not have been fully in accordance with your ideas … but in the bottom of my heart—"

Mariana looked at Valentina Mihailovna, at her wonderful eyes, her slightly painted lips, at her white hands, the parted fingers adorned with rings, which the elegant lady so energetically pressed against the bodice of her silk dress.

Suddenly she interrupted her.

"Did you say a match, Valentina Mihailovna? Do you call that heartless, vulgar friend of yours, Mr. Kollomietzev, 'a match?'"

Valentina Mihailovna took her fingers from her bodice. "Yes, Mariana Vikentievna! I am speaking of that cultured, excellent young man, Mr. Kollomietzev, who would make a wife happy and whom only a mad-woman could refuse! Yes, only a mad-woman!"

"What can I do, ma tante? It seems that I am mad!"

"Have you anything serious against him?"

"Nothing whatever. I simply despise him." Valentina Mihailovna shook her head impatiently and dropped into her chair again.

"Let us leave him. Retournons a nos moutons. And so you love Mr. Nejdanov?"

"Yes."

"And do you intend to continue your interviews with him?"

"Yes."

"But supposing I forbid it?"

"I won't listen to you."

Valentina Mihailovna sprang up from her chair. "What! You won't listen to me! I see … And that is said to me by a girl who has known nothing but kindness from me, whom I have brought up in my own house, that is said to me … said to me—"

"By the daughter of a disgraced father," Mariana put in, sternly. "Go on, don't be on ceremonies!"

"Ce n'est pas moi qui vous le fait dire, mademoiselle! In any case, that is nothing to be proud of! A girl who lives at my expense—"

"Don't throw that in my face, Valentina Mihailovna! It would cost you more to keep a French governess for Kolia … It is I who give him French lessons!"

Valentina Mihailovna raised a hand holding a scented cambric pocket-handkerchief with a large white monogram embroidered in one corner and tried to say something, but Mariana continued passionately:

"You would have been right, a thousand times right, if, instead of counting up all your petty benefits and sacrifices, you could have been in a position to say 'the girl I loved' … but you are too honest to lie about that!" Mariana trembled feverishly. "You have always hated me. And even now you are glad in the bottom of your heart—that same heart you have just mentioned— glad that I am justifying your constant predictions, covering myself with shame and scandal—you are only annoyed because part of this shame is bound to fall on your virtuous, aristocratic house!

"You are insulting me," Valentina Mihailovna whispered. "Be kind enough to leave the room!"

But Mariana could no longer contain herself. "Your household, you said, all your household, Anna Zaharovna and everybody knows of my behaviour! And every one is horrified and indignant … But am I asking anything of you, of all these people? Do you think I care for their good opinion? Do you think that eating your bread has been sweet? I would prefer the greatest poverty to this luxury. There is a gulf between me and your house, an interminable gulf that cannot be crossed. You are an intelligent woman, don't you feel it too? And if you hate me, what do you think I feel towards you? We won't go into unnecessary details, it's too obvious."

"Sortez, sortez, vous dis-je … " Valentina Mihailovna repeated, stamping her pretty little foot.

Mariana took a few steps towards the door.

"I will rid you of my presence directly, only do you know what, Valentina Mihailovna? They say that in Racine's "Bajazet" even Rachel's sortez! was not effective, and you don't come anywhere near her! Then, what was it you said … Je suis une honnete femme, je l'ai et le serai toujours? But I am convinced that I am far more honest than you are! Goodbye!"

Mariana went out quickly and Valentina Mihailovna sprang up from her chair. She wanted to scream, to cry, but did not know what to scream about, and the tears would not come at her bidding.

So she fanned herself with her pocket-handkerchief, but the strong scent of it affected her nerves still more. She felt miserable, insulted … She was conscious of a certain amount of truth in what she had just heard, but how could anyone be so unjust to her? "Am I really so bad?" she thought, and looked at herself in a mirror hanging opposite between two windows. The looking-glass reflected a charming face, somewhat excited, the colour coming and going, but still a fascinating face, with wonderful soft, velvety eyes…

"I? I am bad?" she thought again… . With such eyes?"

But at this moment her husband entered the room and she again covered her face with her pocket-handkerchief.

"What is the matter with you?" he asked anxiously. "What is the matter, Valia?" (He had invented this pet name, but only allowed himself to use it when they were quite alone, particularly in the country.)

At first she declared that there was nothing the matter, but ended by turning around in her chair in a very charming and touching manner and, flinging her arms round his shoulders (he stood bending over her) and hiding her face in the slit of his waistcoat, told him everything. Without any hypocrisy or any interested motive on her part, she tried to excuse Mariana as much as she could, putting all the blame on her extreme youth, her passionate temperament, and the defects of her early education. In the same way she also, without any hidden motive, blamed herself a great deal, saying, "With a daughter of mine this would never have happened! I would have looked after her quite differently!" Sipiagin listened to her indulgently, sympathetically, but with a severe expression on his face. He continued standing in a stooping position without moving his head so long as she held her arms round his shoulders; he called her an angel, kissed her on the forehead, declared that he now knew what course he must pursue as head of the house, and went out, carrying himself like an energetic humane man, who was conscious of having to perform an unpleasant but necessary duty.

At eight o'clock, after dinner, Nejdanov was sitting in his room writing to his friend Silin.

"MY DEAR VLADIMIR,—I write to you at a critical moment of my life. I have been dismissed from this house, I am going away from here. That in itself would be nothing—I am not going alone. The girl I wrote to

you about is coming with me. We are drawn together by the similarity of our fate in life, by our loneliness, convictions, aspirations, and, above all, by our mutual love. Yes, we love each other. I am convinced that I could not experience the passion of love in any other form than that which presents itself to me now. But I should not be speaking the truth if I were to say that I had no mysterious fear, no misgivings at heart … Everything in front of us is enveloped in darkness and we are plunging into that darkness. I need not tell you what we are going for and what we have chosen to do. Mariana and I are not in search of happiness or vain delight; we want to enter the fight together, side by side, supporting each other. Our aim is clear to us, but we do not know the roads that lead to it. Shall we find, if not help and sympathy at any rate, the opportunity to work? Mariana is a wonderfully honest girl. Should we be fated to perish, I will not blame myself for having enticed her away, because now no other life is possible for her. But, Vladimir, Vladimir! I feel so miserable… I am torn by doubt, not in my feelings towards her, of course, but … I do not know! And it is too late to turn back. Stretch out your hands to us from afar, and wish us patience, the power of self- sacrifice, and love … most of all love. And ye, Russian people, unknown to us, but beloved by us with all the force of our beings, with our hearts' blood, receive us in your midst, be kind to us, and teach us what we may expect from you. Goodbye, Vladimir, goodbye!"

Having finished these few lines Nejdanov set out for the village.

The following night, before daybreak, he stood on the outskirts of the birch grove, not far from Sipiagin's garden. A little further on behind the tangled branches of a nut-bush stood a peasant cart harnessed to a pair of unbridled horses. Inside, under the seat of plaited rope, a little grey old peasant was lying asleep on a bundle of hay, covered up to the ears with an old patched coat. Nejdanov kept looking eagerly at the road, at the clumps of laburnums at the bottom of the garden; the still grey night lay around; the little stars did their best to outshine one another and were lost in the vast expanse of sky. To the east the rounded edges of the spreading clouds were tinged with a faint flush of dawn. Suddenly Nejdanov trembled and became alert. Something squeaked near by, the opening of a gate was heard; a tiny feminine creature, wrapped up in a shawl with a bundle slung over her bare arm, walked slowly out of the deep shadow of the laburnums into the dusty road, and crossing over as if on tip- toe, turned towards the grove. Nejdanov rushed towards her.

"Mariana?" he whispered.

"It's I!" came a soft reply from under the shawl.

"This way, come with me," Nejdanov responded, seizing her awkwardly by the bare arm, holding the bundle.

She trembled as if with cold. He led her up to the cart and woke the peasant. The latter jumped up quickly, instantly took his seat on the box, put his arms into the coat sleeves, and seized the rope that served as reins. The horses moved; he encouraged them cautiously in a voice still hoarse from a heavy sleep. Nejdanov placed Mariana on the seat, first spreading out his cloak for her to sit on, wrapped her feet in a rug, as the hay was rather damp, and sitting down beside her, gave the order to start. The peasant pulled the reins, the horses came out of the grove, snorting and shaking themselves, and bumping and rattling its small wheels the cart rolled out on to the road. Nejdanov had his arm round Mariana's waist, while she, raising the shawl with her cold fingers and turning her smiling face towards him, exclaimed: "How beautifully fresh the air is, Aliosha!"

"Yes," the peasant replied, "there'll be a heavy dew!"

There was already such a heavy dew that the axles of the cart wheels as they caught in the tall grass along the roadside shook off whole showers of tiny drops and the grass looked silver-grey.

Mariana again trembled from the cold.

"How cold it is!" she said gaily. "But freedom, Aliosha, freedom!

Chapter 27

SOLOMIN rushed out to the factory gates as soon as he was informed that some sort of gentleman, with a lady, who had arrived in a cart, was asking for him. Without a word of greeting to his visitors, merely nodding his head to them several times, he told the peasant to drive into the yard, and asking him to stop before his own little dwelling, helped Mariana out of the cart. Nejdanov jumped out after her. Solomin conducted them both through a long dark passage, up a narrow, crooked little staircase at the back of the house, up to the second floor. He opened a door and they all went into a tiny neat little room with two windows.

"I'm so glad you've come!" Solomin exclaimed, with his habitual smile, which now seemed even broader and brighter than usual.

"Here are your rooms. This one and another adjoining it. Not much to look at, but never mind, one can live here and there's no one to spy on you. Just under your window there is what my employer calls a flower garden, but which I should call a kitchen garden. It lies right up against the wall and there are hedges to right and left. A quiet little spot. Well, how are you, my dear lady? And how are you, Nejdanov?"

He shook hands with them both. They stood motionless, not taking off their things, and with silent, half-bewildered, half-joyful emotion gazed straight in front of them.

"Well? Why don't you take your things off?" Solomin asked. "Have you much luggage?"

Mariana held up her little bundle.

"I have only this."

"I have a portmanteau and a bag, which I left in the cart. I'll go and—"

"Don't bother, don't bother." Solomin opened the door. "Pavel!" he shouted down the dark staircase, "run and fetch the things from the cart!"

"All right!" answered the never-failing Pavel.

Solomin turned to Mariana, who had taken off her shawl and was unfastening her cloak.

"Did everything go off happily?" he asked.

"Quite … not a soul saw us. I left a letter for Madame Sipiagina. Vassily Fedotitch, I didn't bring any clothes with me, because you're going to send us … " (Mariana wanted to say to the people, but hesitated). "They wouldn't have been of any use in any case. I have money to buy what is necessary."

"We'll see to that later on … Ah!" he exclaimed, pointing to Pavel who was at that moment coming in together with Nejdanov and the luggage from The cart, "I can recommend you my best friend here. You may rely on him absolutely, as you would on me. Have you told Tatiana about the samovar?" he added in an undertone.

"It will soon be ready," Pavel replied; "and cream and everything."

"Tatiana is Pavel's wife and just as reliable as he is," Solomin continued. "Until you get used to things, my dear lady, she will look after you."

Mariana flung her cloak on to a couch covered with leather, which was standing in a corner of the room.

"Will you please call me Mariana, Vassily Fedotitch; I don't want to be a lady, neither do I want servants… I did not go away from there to be waited on. Don't look at my dress—I hadn't any other. I must change all that now."

Her dress of fine brown cloth was very simple, but made by a St. Petersburg dressmaker. It fitted beautifully round her waist and shoulders and had altogether a fashionable air.

"Well, not a servant if you like, but a help, in the American fashion. But you must have some tea. It's early yet, but you are both tired, no doubt. I have to be at the factory now on business, but will look in later on. If you want anything, ask Pavel or Tatiana."

Mariana held out both her hands to him quickly.

"How can we thank you enough, Vassily Fedotitch?" She looked at him with emotion. Solomin stroked one of her hands gently. "I should say it's not worth thanking for, but that wouldn't be true. I had better say that your thanks give me the greatest of pleasure. So we are quits. Good morning. Come along, Pavel."

Mariana and Nejdanov were left alone.

She rushed up to him and looked at him with the same expression with which she had looked at Solomin, only with even greater delight, emotion, radiance: "Oh, my dear!" she exclaimed. "We are beginning a new life … at last! At last! You can't believe how this poor little room, where we are to spend a few days, seems sweet and charming compared to those hateful palaces! Are you glad?"

Nejdanov took her hands and pressed them against his breast.

"I am happy, Mariana, to begin this new life with you! You will be my guiding star, my support, my strength—"

"Dear, darling Aliosha! But stop—we must wash and tidy ourselves a little. I will go into my room … and you … stay here. I won't be a minute—"

Mariana went into the other room and shut the door. A minute later she opened it half-way and, putting her head through, said: "Isn't Solomin nice!" Then she shut the door again and the key turned in the lock.

Nejdanov went up to the window and looked out into the garden… One old, very old, apple tree particularly attracted his attention. He shook himself, stretched, opened his portmanteau, but took nothing out of it; he became lost in thought…

A quarter of an hour later Mariana returned with a beaming, freshly-washed face, brimming over with gaiety, and a few minutes later Tatiana, Pavel's wife, appeared with the samovar, tea things, rolls, and cream.

In striking contrast to her gipsy-like husband she was a typical Russian— buxom, with masses of flaxen hair, which she wore in a thick plait twisted round a horn comb. She had coarse though pleasant features, good-natured grey eyes, and was dressed in a very neat though somewhat faded print dress. Her hands were clean and well-shaped, though large. She bowed composedly, greeted them in a firm, clear accent without any sing-song about it, and set to work arranging the tea things.

Mariana went up to her.

"Let me help you, Tatiana. Only give me a napkin."

Don't bother, miss, we are used to it. Vassily Fedotitch told me to. If you want anything please let us know. We shall be delighted to do anything we can."

"Please don't call me miss, Tatiana. I am dressed like a lady, but I am … I am quite—"

Tatiana's penetrating glance disconcerted Mariana; she ceased.

"And what are you then?" Tatiana asked in her steady voice.

"If you really want to know … I am certainly a lady by birth. But I want to get rid of all that. I want to become like all simple women."

"Oh, I see! You want to become simplified, like so many do nowadays."

"What did you say, Tatiana? To become simplified?"

"Yes, that's a word that has sprung up among us. To become simplified means to be like the common people. Teaching the people is all very well in its way, but it must be a difficult task, very difficult! I hope you'll get on."

"To become simplified!" Mariana repeated. "Do you hear, Aliosha, you and I have now become simplified!"

"Is he your husband or your brother?" Tatiana asked, carefully washing the cups with her large, skilful hands as she looked from one to the other with a kindly smile.

"No," Mariana replied; "he is neither my husband nor my brother."

Tatiana raised her head.

"Then you are just living together freely? That also happens very often now. At one time it was to be met with only among nonconformists, but nowadays other folks do it too. Where there is God's blessing you can live in peace without the priest's aid. We have some living like that at the factory. Not the worst of folk either."

"What nice words you use, Tatiana! 'Living together freely' … I like that. I'll tell you what I want to ask of you, Tatiana. I want to make or buy a dress, something like yours, only a little plainer. Then I want shoes and stockings and a kerchief— everything like you have. I've got some money."

"That's quite easy, miss… There, there, don't be cross. I won't call you miss if you don't like it. But what am I to call you?"

"Call me Mariana."

"And what is your father's Christian name?"

"Why do you want my father's name? Call me simply Mariana, as I call you Tatiana."

"I don't like to somehow. You had better tell me."

"As you like. My father's name was Vikent. And what was your father's?

"He was called Osip."

"Then I shall call you Tatiana Osipovna."

"And I'll call you Mariana Vikentievna. That will be splendid."

"Won't you take a cup of tea with us, Tatiana Osipovna?"

"For once I will, Mariana Vikentievna, although Egoritch will scold me afterwards."

"Who is Egoritch?"

"Pavel, my husband."

"Sit down, Tatiana Osipovna."

"Thank you, Mariana Vikentievna."

Tatiana sat down and began sipping her tea and nibbling pieces of sugar. She kept turning the lump of sugar round in her fingers, screwing up her eye on the side on which she bit it. Mariana entered into conversation with her and she replied quite at her ease, asked questions in her turn, and volunteered various pieces of information. She simply worshipped Solomin and put her husband only second to him. She did not, however, care for the factory life.

"It's neither town nor country here. I wouldn't stop an hour if it were not for Vassily Fedotitch!"

Mariana listened to her attentively, while Nejdanov, sitting a little to one side, watched her and wondered at her interest. For Mariana it was all so new, but it seemed to him that he had seen crowds of women like Tatiana and spoken to them hundreds of times.

"Do you know, Tatiana Osipovna?" Mariana began at last; "you think that we want to teach the people, but we want to serve them."

"Serve them? Teach them; that's the best thing you can do for them. Look at me, for instance. When I married Egoritch I didn't so much as know how to read and write. Now I've learned, thanks to Vassily Fedotitch. He didn't teach me himself, he paid an old man to do it. It was he who taught me. You see I'm still young, although I'm grown up."

Mariana was silent.

"I wanted to learn some sort of trade, Tatiana Osipovna," Mariana began; "we must talk about that later on. I'm not good at sewing, but if I could learn to cook, then I could go out as a cook."

Tatiana became thoughtful.

"Why a cook? Only rich people and merchants keep cooks; the poor do their own cooking. And to cook at a mess for workmen … why you couldn't do that!"

"But I could live in a rich man's house and get to know poor people. How else can I get to know them? I shall not always have such an opportunity as I have with you."

Tatiana turned her empty cup upside down on the saucer.

"It's a difficult matter," she said at last with a sigh, "and can't be settled so easily. I'll do what I can, but I'm not very clever. We must talk it over with Egoritch. He's clever if you like! Reads all sorts of books and has everything at his fingers' ends." At this point she glanced at Mariana who was rolling up a cigarette.

"You'll excuse me, Mariana Vikentievna, but if you really want to become simplified you must give that up." She pointed to the cigarette. "If you want to be a cook, that would never do. Everyone would see at once that you are a lady."

Mariana threw the cigarette out of the window.

"I won't smoke any more… It's quite easy to give that up. Women of the people don't smoke, so I suppose I ought not to."

"That's quite true, Mariana Vikentievna. Our men indulge in it, but not the women. And here's Vassily Fedotitch coming to see you. Those are his steps. You ask him. He'll arrange everything for you in the best possible way."

Solomin's voice was heard at the door.

"Can I come in?"

"Come in, come in!" Mariana called out.

"It's an English habit of mine," Solomin observed as he came in. "Well, and how are you getting on? Not homesick yet, eh? I see you're having tea with Tatiana. You listen to her, she's a sensible person. My employer is coming today. It's rather a nuisance. He's staying to dinner. But it can't be helped. He's the master."

"What sort of a man is he?" Nejdanov asked, coming out of his corner.

"Oh, he's not bad … knows what he's about. One of the new generation. He's very polite, wears cuffs, and has his eyes about him no less than the old sort. He would skin a flint with his own hands and say, 'Turn to this side a little, please … there is still a living spot here … I

must clean it!' He's nice enough to me, because I'm necessary to him. I just looked in to say that I may not get a chance of seeing you again today. Dinner will be brought to you here, and please don't show yourselves in the yard. Do you think the Sipiagins will make a search for you, Mariana? Will they make a hunt?"

"I don't think so," Mariana replied.

"And I think they will," Nejdanov remarked.

"It doesn't matter either way," Solomin continued. "You must be a little careful at first, but in a short time you can do as you like."

"Yes; only there's one thing," Nejdanov observed, "Markelov must know where I am; he must be informed."

"But why?"

"I am afraid it must be done—for the cause. He must always know my whereabouts. I've given my word. But he's quite safe, you know!"

Very well. We can send Pavel."

"And will my clothes be ready for me?"

"Your special costume you mean? Why, of course… the same masquerade. It's not expensive at any rate. Goodbye. You must be tired. Come, Tatiana."

Mariana and Nejdanov were left alone again.

Chapter 28

FIRST they clasped each other's hands, then Mariana offered to help him tidy his room. She immediately began unpacking his portmanteau and bag, declining his offer of help on the ground that she must get used to work and wished to do it all herself. She hung his clothes on nails which she discovered in the table drawer and knocked into the wall with the back of a hairbrush for want of a hammer. Then she arranged his linen in a little old chest of drawers standing in between the two windows.

"What is this? " she asked suddenly. "Why, it's a revolver. Is it loaded? What do you want it for?"

"It is not loaded … but you had better give it to me. You want to know why I have it? How can one get on without a revolver in our calling?"

She laughed and went on with her work, shaking each thing out separately and beating it with her hand; she even stood two pairs of boots under the sofa; the few books, packet of papers, and tiny copy-book of verses she placed triumphantly upon a three- cornered table, calling it a writing and work table, while the other, a round one, she called a dining and tea table. Then she took up the copy-book of verses in both hands and, raising it on a level with her face, looked over the edge at Nejdanov and said with a smile:

"We will read this together when we have some time to spare, won't we?

"Give it to me! I'll burn it!" Nejdanov burst out. "That's all it's fit for!

"Then why did you take it with you? No, I won't let you burn it. However, authors are always threatening to burn their things, but they never do. I will put it in my room."

Nejdanov was just about to protest when Mariana rushed into the next room with the copy-book and came back without it.

She sat down beside him, but instantly got up again. "You have not yet been in my room; would you like to see it? It's quite as nice as yours. Come and look."

Nejdanov rose and followed her. Her room, as she called it, was somewhat smaller than his, but the furniture was altogether smarter and newer. Some flowers in a crystal vase stood on the window-sill and there was an iron bedstead in a corner.

"Isn't Solomin a darling!" Mariana exclaimed. "But we mustn't get too spoiled. I don't suppose we shall often have rooms like these. Do you know what I've been thinking? It would be rather nice if we could get a place together so that we need not part! It will probably be difficult," she added after a pause; "but we must think of it. But all the same, you won't go back to St. Petersburg, will you?

"What should I do in St. Petersburg? Attend lectures at the university or give lessons? That's no use to me now."

"We must ask Solomin," Mariana observed. "He will know best."

They went back to the other room and sat down beside each other again. They praised Solomin, Tatiana, Pavel; spoke of the Sipiagins and how their former life had receded from them far into the distance, as if enveloped in a mist; then they clasped each other's hand again, exchanged tender glances; wondered what class they had better go among first, and how to behave so that people should not suspect them.

Nejdanov declared that the less they thought about that, and the more naturally they behaved, the better.

"Of course! We want to become simple, as Tatiana says."

"I didn't mean it in that sense," Nejdanov began; "I meant that we must not be self-conscious."

Mariana suddenly burst out laughing.

"Do you remember, Aliosha, how I said that we had both become simplified?"

Nejdanov also laughed, repeated "simplified," and began musing. Mariana too became pensive.

"Aliosha!" she exclaimed.

"What is it?"

"It seems to me that we are both a little uncomfortable. Young— des nouveaux maries," she explained, "when away on their honeymoon no

doubt feel as we do. They are happy … all is well with them— but they feel uncomfortable."

Nejdanov gave a forced smile.

"You know very well, Mariana, that we are not young in that sense."

Mariana rose from her chair and stood before him.

"That depends on yourself."

"How?"

"Aliosha, you know, dear, that when you tell me, as a man of honour … and I will believe you because I know you are honourable; when you tell me that you love me with that love… the love that gives one person the right over another's life, when you tell me that—I am yours."

Nejdanov blushed and turned away a little.

"When I tell you that…

"Yes, then! But you see, Aliosha, you don't say that to me now… Oh yes, Aliosha, you are truly an honourable man. Enough of this! Let us talk of more serious things."

"But I do love you, Mariana!"

"I don't doubt that … and shall wait. But there, I have not quite finished arranging your writing table. Here is something wrapped up, something hard."

Nejdanov sprang up from his chair.

"Don't touch that, Mariana… Leave it alone, please!

Mariana looked at him over her shoulder and raised her eyebrows in amazement.

Is it a mystery? A secret? Have you a secret?

"Yes … yes … " Nejdanov stammered out, and added by way of explanation, "it's a portrait."

The word escaped him unawares. The packet Mariana held in her hand was her own portrait, which Markelov had given Nejdanov.

"A portrait?" she drawled out. "Is it a woman's?

She handed him the packet, which he took so clumsily that it slipped out of his hand and fell open.

"Why … it's my portrait! "Mariana exclaimed quickly. "I suppose I may look at my own portrait." She took it out of Nejdanov's hand.

"Did you do it?

"No … I didn't."

"Who then? Markelov?"

"Yes, you've guessed right."

"Then how did it come to be in your possession?"

"He gave it to me."

"When?

Nejdanov told her when and under what circumstances. While he was speaking Mariana glanced from him to the portrait. The same thought flashed across both their minds. "If HE were in this room, then HE would have the right to demand … " But neither Mariana nor Nejdanov gave expression to this thought in words, perhaps because each was conscious what was in the other's mind.

Mariana quietly wrapped the portrait up again in its paper and put it on the table.

"What a good man he is!" she murmured. "I wonder where he is now?"

"Why, at home of course. Tomorrow or the day after I must go and see him about some books and pamphlets. He promised to give me some, but evidently forgot to do so before I left."

"And do you think, Aliosha, that when he gave you this portrait he renounced everything… absolutely everything?"

I think so."

"Do you think you will find him at home?"

Of course."

"Ah!" Mariana lowered her eyes and dropped her hands at her sides. "But here comes Tatiana with our dinner," she exclaimed suddenly. "Isn't she a dear!"

Tatiana appeared with the knives and forks, serviettes, plates and dishes. While laying the table she related all the news about the factory. "The master came from Moscow by rail and started running from floor to floor like a madman. Of course he doesn't understand anything and does it only for show— to set an example so to speak. Vassily Fedotitch treats him like a child. The master wanted to make some unpleasantness, but Vassily Fedotitch soon shut him up. 'I'll throw it up this minute,' he said, so he soon began to sing small. They are having dinner now. The master brought someone with him. A Moscow swell who does nothing but admire everything. He must be very rich, I think, by the way he holds his tongue and shakes his head. And so stout, very stout! A real swell! No

wonder there's a saying that 'Moscow lies at the foot of Russia and everything rolls down to her.'"

"How you notice everything!" Mariana exclaimed.

"Yes, I do rather," Tatiana observed. "Well, here is your dinner. Come and have it and I'll sit and look at you for a little while."

Mariana and Nejdanov sat down to table, whilst Tatiana sat down on the window-sill and rested her cheek in her hand.

"I watch you … " she observed. "And what dear, young, tender creatures you are. You're so nice to look at that it quite makes my heart ache. Ah, my dear! You are taking a heavier burden on your shoulders than you can bear. It's people like you that the tsar's folk are ready to put into prison."

"Nothing of the kind. Don't frighten us," Nejdanov remarked. "You know the old saying, 'As you make your bed so you must lie on it.' "

"Yes, I know. But the beds are so narrow nowadays that you can't get out of them!"

"Have you any children?" Mariana asked to change the subject.

"Yes, I have a boy. He goes to school now. I had a girl too, but she's gone, the little bird! An accident happened to her. She fell under a wheel. If only it had killed her at once! But no, she suffered a long while. Since then I've become more tender- hearted. Before I was as wild and hard as a tree!"

"Why, did you not love your Pavel?"

"But that's not the same. Only a girl's feelings. And you—do you love HIM?"

"Of course I do."

Very much?

"Ever so much."

"Really? … " Tatiana looked from one to the other, but said nothing more.

"I'll tell you what I would like. Could you get me some coarse, strong wool? I want to knit some stockings… plain ones."

Tatiana promised to have everything done, and clearing the table, went out of the room with her firm, quiet step.

"Well, what shall we do now?" Mariana asked, turning to Nejdanov, and without, waiting for a reply, continued, "Since our real work does

not begin until tomorrow, let us devote this evening to literature. Would you like to? We can read your poems. I will be a severe critic, I promise you."

It took Nejdanov a long time before he consented, but he gave in at last and began reading aloud out of his copybook. Mariana sat close to him and gazed into his face as he read. She had been right; she turned out to be a very severe critic. Very few of the verses pleased her. She preferred the purely lyrical, short ones, to the didactic, as she expressed it. Nejdanov did not read well. He had not the courage to attempt any style, and at the same time wanted to avoid a dry tone. It turned out neither the one thing nor the other. Mariana interrupted him suddenly by asking if he knew Dobrolubov's beautiful poem, which begins, "To die for me no terror holds." She read it to him—also not very well—in a somewhat childish manner.

[To die for me no terror holds, Yet one fear presses on my mind, That death should on me helpless play A satire of the bitter kind. For much I fear that o'er my corpse The scalding tears of friends shall flow, And that, too late, they should with zeal Fresh flowers upon my body throw. That fate sardonic should recall The ones I loved to my cold side, And make me lying in the ground, The object of love once denied. That all my aching heart's desires, So vainly sought for from my birth, Should crowd unbidden, smiling kind Above my body's mound of earth.]

Nejdanov thought that it was too sad and too bitter. He could not have written a poem like that, he added, as he had no fears of any one weeping over his grave … there would be no tears.

"There will be if I outlive you," Mariana observed slowly, and lifting her eyes to the ceiling she asked, in a whisper, as if speaking to herself:

"How did he do the portrait of me? From memory?"

Nejdanov turned to her quickly.

"Yes, from memory."

Mariana was surprised at his reply. It seemed to her that she merely thought the question. "It is really wonderful … " she continued in the same tone of voice. "Why, he can't draw at all. What was I talking about?" she added aloud. "Oh yes, it was about Dobrolubov's poems. One ought to write poems like Pushkin's, or even like Dobrolubov's. It is not poetry exactly, but something nearly as good."

"And poems like mine one should not write at all. Isn't that so?" Nejdanov asked.

"Poems like yours please your friends, not because they are good, but because you are a good man and they are like you."

Nejdanov smiled.

"You have completely buried them and me with them!" Mariana slapped his hand and called him naughty. Soon after she announced that she was tired and wanted to go to bed.

"By the way," she added, shaking back her short thick curls, "do you know that I have a hundred and thirty roubles? And how much have you?"

"Ninety-eight."

Oh, then we are rich … for simplified folk. Well, good night, until tomorrow."

She went out, but in a minute or two her door opened slightly and he heard her say, "Goodnight!" then more softly another "Goodnight!" and the key turned in the lock.

Nejdanov sank on to the sofa and covered his face with his hands. Then he got up quickly, went to her door and knocked.

"What is it?" was heard from within.

"Not till tomorrow, Mariana … not till tomorrow!"

"Till tomorrow," she replied softly.

Chapter 29

EARLY the next morning Nejdanov again knocked at Mariana's door.

"It is I," he replied in answer to her "Who's that? "Can you come out to me?"

"In a minute."

She came out and uttered a cry of alarm. At first she did not recognise him. He had on a long-skirted, shabby, yellowish nankin coat, with small buttons and a high waist; his hair was dressed in the Russian fashion with a parting straight down the middle; he had a blue kerchief round his neck, in his hand he held a cap with a broken peak, on his feet a pair of dirty leather boots.

"Heavens!" Mariana exclaimed. "How ugly you look!" and thereupon threw her arms round him and kissed him quickly. "But why did you get yourself up like this? You look like some sort of shopkeeper, or pedlar, or a retired servant. Why this long coat? Why not simply like a peasant?"

"Why?" Nejdanov began. He certainly did look like some sort of fishmonger in that garb, was conscious of it himself, and was annoyed and embarrassed at heart. He felt uncomfortable, and not knowing what to do with his hands, kept patting himself on the breast with the fingers outspread, as though he were brushing himself.

"Because as a peasant I should have been recognised at once Pavel says, and that in this costume I look as if I had been born to it … which is not very flattering to my vanity, by the way."

"Are you going to begin at once?" Mariana asked eagerly.

"Yes, I shall try, though in reality—"

"You are lucky!" Mariana interrupted him.

"This Pavel is a wonderful fellow," Nejdanov continued. "He can see through and through you in a second, and will suddenly screw up his face as if he knew nothing, and would not interfere with anything for the world. He works for the cause himself, yet laughs at it the whole time.

He brought me the books from Markelov; he knows him and calls him Sergai Mihailovitch; and as for Solomin, he would go through fire and water for him."

"And so would Tatiana," Mariana observed. "Why are people so devoted to him?"

Nejdanov did not reply.

"What sort of books did Pavel bring you?" Mariana asked.

"Oh, nothing new. 'The Story of the Four Brothers,' and then the ordinary, well-known ones, which are far better I think."

Mariana looked around uneasily.

"I wonder what has become of Tatiana? She promised to come early."

"Here I am! " Tatiana exclaimed, coming in with a bundle in her hand. She had heard Mariana's exclamation from behind the door.

"There's plenty of time. See what I've brought you!"

Mariana flew towards her.

"Have you brought it?"

Tatiana patted the bundle.

"Everything is here, quite ready. You have only to put the things on and go out to astonish the world."

"Come along, come along, Tatiana Osipovna, you are a dear—"

Mariana led her off to her own room.

Left alone, Nejdanov walked up and down the room once or twice with a peculiarly shuffling gait (he imagined that all shopkeepers walked like that), then he carefully sniffed at this sleeves, the inside of his cap, made a grimace, looked at himself in the little looking-glass hanging in between the windows, and shook his head; he certainly did not look very prepossessing. "So much the better," he thought. Then he took several pamphlets, thrust them into his side pocket, and began to practise speaking like a shopkeeper. "That sounds like it," he thought, "but after all there is no need of acting, my get-up is convincing enough." Just then he recollected a German exile, who had to make his escape right across Russia with only a poor knowledge of the language. But thanks to a merchant's cap which he had bought in a provincial town, he was taken everywhere for a merchant and had successfully made his way across the frontier.

At this moment Solomin entered.

"I say!" he exclaimed. "Arrayed in all your war paint? Excuse me, my dear fellow, but in that garb one can hardly speak to you respectfully."

"Please don't. I had long meant to ask you—"

"But it's early as yet. It doesn't matter if you only want to get used to it, only you must not go out yet. My employer is still here. He's in bed."

"I'll go out later on," Nejdanov responded. "I'll explore the neighbourhood a little, until further orders come."

"Capital! But I tell you what, Alexai … I may call you Alexai, may I not?"

"Certainly, or Lexy if you like," Nejdanov added with a smile.

"No; there is no need to overdo things. Listen. Good counsel is better than money, as the saying goes. I see that you have pamphlets. Distribute them wherever you like, only not in the factory on any account!"

"Why not?"

"In the first place, because it won't be safe for you; in the second, because I promised the owner not to do that sort of thing here. You see the place is his after all, and then something has already been done … a school and so on. You might do more harm than good. Further than that, you may do as you like, I shall not hinder you. But you must not interfere with my workpeople."

"Caution is always useful," Nejdanov remarked with a sarcastic smile.

Solomin smiled his characteristic broad smile.

"Yes, my dear Alexai, it's always useful. But what do I see? Where are we?"

The last words referred to Mariana, who at that moment appeared in the doorway of her room in a print dress that had been washed a great many times, with a yellow kerchief over her shoulders and a red one on her head. Tatiana stood behind her, smiling good- naturedly. Mariana seemed younger and brighter in her simple garment and looked far better than Nejdanov in his long-skirted coat.

"Vassily Fedotitch, don't laugh, please," Mariana implored, turning as red as a poppy.

"There's a nice couple!" Tatiana exclaimed, clapping her hands. "But you, my dear, don't be angry, you look well enough, but beside my little dove you're nowhere."

"And, really, she is charming," Nejdanov thought; "oh, how I love her!"

"Look now," Tatiana continued, "she insisted on changing rings with me. She has given me a golden ring and taken my silver one."

"Girls of the people do not wear gold rings," Mariana observed.

Tatiana sighed.

"I'll take good care of it, my dear; don't be afraid."

"Well, sit down, sit down both of you," Solomin began; he had been standing all the while with his head bent a little to one side, gazing at Mariana. "In olden days, if you remember, people always sat down before starting on a journey. And you have both a long and wearisome one before you."

Mariana, still crimson, sat down, then Nejdanov and Solomin, and last of all Tatiana took her seat on a thick block of wood. Solomin looked at each of them in turn.

"Let us step back a pace, Let us step back a bit, To see with what grace And how nicely we sit,"

he said with a frown. Suddenly he burst out laughing, but so good-naturedly that no one was in the least offended, on the contrary, they all began to feel merry too. Only Nejdanov rose suddenly.

"I must go now," he said; "this is all very nice, but rather like a farce. Don't be uneasy," he added, turning to Solomin. "I shall not interfere with your people. I'll try my tongue on the folk around about and will tell you all about it when I come back, Mariana, if there is anything to tell. Wish me luck!"

"Why not have a cup of tea first? " Tatiana remarked.

"No thanks. If I want any I can go into an eating-house or into a public house."

Tatiana shook her head.

"Goodbye, goodbye … good luck to you!" Nejdanov added, entering upon his role of small shopkeeper. But before he had reached the door Pavel thrust his head in from the passage under his very nose, and handing him a thin, long staff, cut out all the way down like a screw, he said:

"Take this, Alexai Dmitritch, and lean on it as you walk. And the farther you hold it away from yourself the better it will look."

Nejdanov took the staff without a word and went out. Tatiana wanted to go out too, but Mariana stopped her.

"Wait a minute, Tatiana Osipovna. I want you."

"I'll be back directly with the samovar. Your friend has gone off without tea, he was in such a mighty hurry. But that is no reason why you should not have any. Later on things will be clearer."

Tatiana went out and Solomin also rose. Mariana was standing with her back to him, but when at last she turned towards him, rather surprised that he had not said a single word, she saw in his face, in his eyes that were fixed on her, an expression she had not seen there before; an expression of inquiry, anxiety, almost of curiosity. She became confused and blushed again. Solomin, too, was ashamed of what she had read in his face and began talking louder than was his wont.

"Well, well, Mariana, and so you have made a beginning."

"What sort of beginning, Vassily Fedotitch? Do you call this a beginning? Alexai was right. It's as if we were acting a farce."

Solomin sat down again.

"But, Mariana … what did you picture the beginning to be like? Not standing behind the barricades waving a flag and shouting, 'Hurrah for the republic!' Besides, that is not a woman's work. Now, today you will begin teaching some Lukeria, something good for her, and a difficult matter it will be, because you won't understand your Lukeria and she won't understand you, and on top of it she will imagine that what you are teaching is of no earthly use to her. In two or three weeks you will try your hand on another Lukeria, and meanwhile you will be washing a baby here, teaching another the alphabet, or handing some sick man his medicine. That will be your beginning."

"But sisters of mercy do that, Vassily Fedotitch! What is the use of all this, then?" Mariana pointed to herself and round about with a vague gesture. "I dreamt of something else."

"Did you want to sacrifice yourself? "

Mariana's eyes glistened.

Yes, yes, yes!"

"And Nejdanov?"

Mariana shrugged her shoulders.

"What of Nejdanov? We shall go together… or I will go alone."

Solomin looked at her intently.

"Do you know, Mariana … excuse the coarse expression … but, to my mind, combing the scurfy head of a gutter child is a sacrifice; a great sacrifice of which not many people are capable."

"I would not shirk that, Vassily Fedotitch."

"I know you would not. You are capable of doing that and will do it, until something else turns up.

"But for that sort of thing I must learn of Tatiana!"

"You could not do better. You will be washing pots and plucking chickens … And, who knows, maybe you will save your country in that way!"

"You are laughing at me, Vassily Fedotitch."

Solomin shook his head slowly.

"My dear Mariana, believe me, I am not laughing at you. What I said was the simple truth. You are already, all you Russian women, more capable and higher than we men."

Mariana raised her eyes.

"I would like to live up to your idea of us, Solomin … and then I should be ready to die."

Solomin stood up.

"No, it is better to live! That's the main thing. By the way, would you like to know what is happening at the Sipiagins? Won't they do anything? You have only to drop Pavel a hint and he will find out everything in a twinkling."

Mariana was surprised.

"What a wonderful person he is!"

"Yes, he certainly is wonderful. And should you want to marry Alexai, he will arrange that too with Zosim, the priest. You remember I told you about him. But perhaps it is not necessary as yet, eh? "

No, not yet."

"Very well." Solomin went up to the door dividing the two rooms, Mariana's and Nejdanov's, and examined the lock.

"What are you doing?" Mariana asked. "Does it lock all right?

Yes," Mariana whispered.

Solomin turned to her. She did not raise her eyes.

"Then there is no need to bother about the Sipiagins," he continued gaily, "is there?"

Solomin was about to go out.

"Vassily Fedotitch … "

"Yes… "

"Why is it you are so talkative with me when you are usually so silent? You can't imagine what pleasure it gives me."

"Why?" Solomin took both her soft little hands in his big hard ones. "Why, did you ask? Well, I suppose it must be because I love you so much. Good-bye."

He went out. Mariana stood pensive looking after him. In a little while she went to find Tatiana who had not yet brought the samovar. She had tea with her, washed some pots, plucked a chicken, and even combed out some boy's tangled head of hair.

Before dinner she returned to her own rooms and soon afterwards Nejdanov arrived.

He came in tired and covered with dust and dropped on to the sofa. She immediately sat down beside him.

Well, tell me what happened."

You remember the two lines," he responded in a weary voice:

"It would have been so funny Were it not so sad."

"Do you remember?"

"Of course I do."

"Well, these lines apply admirably to my first expedition, excepting that it was more funny than sad. I've come to the conclusion that there is nothing easier than to act a part. No one dreamed of suspecting me. There was one thing, however, that I had not thought of. You must be prepared with some sort of yarn beforehand, or else when any one asks you where you've come from and why you've come, you don't know what to say. But, however, even that is not so important. You've only to stand a drink and lie as much as you like."

"And you? Did you lie?"

"Of course I did, as much as I could. And then I've discovered that absolutely everyone you come across is discontented, only no one cares to find out the remedy for this discontent. I made a very poor show at propaganda, only succeeded in leaving a couple of pamphlets in a room and shoving a third into a cart. What may come of them the Lord only knows! I ran across four men whom I offered some pamphlets. The first asked if it was a religious book and refused to take it; the second could not read, but took it home to his children for the sake of the picture on the cover; the third seemed hopeful at first, but ended by abusing me

soundly and also not taking it; the fourth took a little book, thanked me very much, but I doubt if he understood a single word I said to him. Besides that, a dog bit my leg, a peasant woman threatened me with a poker from the door of her hut, shouting, 'Ugh! you pig! You Moscow rascals! There's no end to you!' and then a soldier shouted after me, 'Hi, there! We'll make mince- meat of you!' and he got drunk at my expense!"

"Well, and what else?

"What else? I've got a blister on my foot; one of my boots is horribly large. And now I'm as hungry as a wolf and my head is splitting from the vodka."

"Why, did you drink much?"

"No, only a little to set the example, but I've been in five public-houses. I can't endure this beastliness, vodka. Goodness knows why our people drink it. If one must drink this stuff in order to become simplified, then I had rather be excused!"

"And so no one suspected you?"

"No one, with the exception, perhaps, of a bar-man, a stout individual with pale eyes, who did look at me somewhat suspiciously. I overheard him saying to his wife, "Keep an eye on that carroty-haired one with the squint.' (I was not aware until that moment that I had a squint.) 'There's something wrong about him. See how he's sticking over his vodka.' What he meant by 'sticking' exactly, I didn't understand, but it could hardly have been to my credit. It reminded me of the mauvais ton in Gogol's "Revisor", do you remember? Perhaps because I tried to pour my vodka under the table. Oh dear! It is difficult for an aesthetic creature like me to come in contact with real life."

"Never mind. Better luck next time," Mariana said consolingly. "But I am glad you see the humorous side of this, your first attempt. You were not really bored, were you?"

"No, it was rather amusing. But I know that I shall think it all over now and it will make me miserable."

"But I won't let you think about it! I will tell you everything I did. Dinner will be here in a minute. By the way, I must tell you that I washed the saucepan Tatiana cooked the soup in … I'll tell you everything, every little detail."

And so she did. Nejdanov listened and could not take his eyes off her. She stopped several times to ask why he looked at her so intently, but he was silent.

After dinner she offered to read Spielhagen aloud to him, but had scarcely got through one page when he got up suddenly and fell at her feet. She stood up; he flung both his arms round her knees and began uttering passionate, disconnected, and despairing words. He wanted to die, he knew he would soon die … She did not stir, did not resist. She calmly submitted to his passionate embraces, and calmly, even affectionately, glanced down upon him. She laid both her hands on his head, feverishly pressed to the fold of her dress, but her calmness had a more powerful effect on him than if she had repulsed him. He got up murmuring: "Forgive me, Mariana, for today and for yesterday. Tell me again that you are prepared to wait until I am worthy of your love, and forgive me."

"I gave you my word. I never change."

"Thank you, dear. Goodbye."

Nejdanov went out and Mariana locked the door of her room.

Chapter 30

A FORTNIGHT later, in the same room, Nejdanov sat bending over his three-legged table, writing to his friend Silin by the dim light of a tallow candle. (It was long past midnight. Muddy garments lay scattered on the sofa, on the floor, just where they had been thrown off. A fine drizzly rain pattered against the window-panes and a strong, warm wind moaned about the roof of the house.)

MY DEAR VLADIMIR,—I am writing to you without giving my address and will send this letter by a messenger to a distant posting- station as my being here is a secret, and to disclose it might mean the ruin not of myself alone. It is enough for you to know that for the last two weeks I have been living in a large factory together with Mariana. We ran away from the Sipiagins on the day on which I last wrote to you. A friend has given us shelter here. For convenience sake I will call him Vassily. He is the chief here and an excellent man. Our stay is only of a temporary nature; we will move on when the time for action comes. But, however, judging by events so far, the time is hardly likely ever to come! Vladimir, I am horribly miserable. I must tell you before everything that although Mariana and I ran away together, we have so far been living like brother and sister. She loves me and told me she would be mine if I feel I have the right to ask it of her.

Vladimir, I do not feel that I have the right! She trusts me, believes in my honour—I cannot deceive her. I know that I never loved nor will ever love any one more than her (of that I am convinced), but for all that, how can I unite her fate forever with mine? A living being to a corpse? Well, if not a complete corpse, at any rate, a half-dead creature. Where would one's conscience be? I can hear you say that if passion was strong enough the conscience would be silent. But that is just the point; I am a corpse, an honest, well-meaning corpse if you like, but a corpse nevertheless. Please do not say that I always exaggerate. Everything I have told you is absolutely true. Mariana is very reserved and is at present wrapped up in her activities in which she believes, and I?

Well, enough of love and personal happiness and all that. It is now a fortnight since I have been going among "the people," and really it would be impossible to imagine anything more stupid than they are. Of course the fault lies probably more in me than in the work itself. I am not a fanatic. I am not one of those who regenerate themselves by contact with the people and do not lay them on my aching bosom like a flannel bandage—I want to influence them. But how? How can it be done? When I am among them I find myself listening all the time, taking things in, but when it comes to saying anything—I am at a loss for a word! I feel that I am no good, a bad actor in a part that does not suit him. Conscientiousness or scepticism are absolutely of no use, nor is a pitiful sort of humour directed against oneself. It is worse than useless! I find it disgusting to look at the filthy rags I carry about on me, the masquerade as Vassily calls it! They say you must first learn the language of the people, their habits and customs, but rubbish, rubbish, rubbish, I say! You have only to BELIEVE in what you say and say what you like! I once happened to hear a sectarian prophet delivering a sermon. Goodness only knows what arrant nonsense he talked, a sort of gorgeous mix-up of ecclesiastical learning, interspersed with peasant expressions, not even in decent Russian, but in some outlandish dialect, but he took one by storm with his enthusiasm—went straight to the heart. There he stood with flashing eyes, the voice deep and firm, with clenched fist—as though he were made of iron! No one understood what he was saying, but everyone bowed down before him and followed him. But when I begin to speak, I seem like a culprit begging for forgiveness. I ought to join the sectarians, although their wisdom is not great … but they have faith, faith!

Mariana too has faith. She works from morning until night with Tatiana—a peasant woman here, as good as can be and not by any means stupid; she says, by the way, that we want to become simplified and calls us simple souls. Mariana is about working with this woman from morning until night, scarcely sitting down for a moment, just like a regular ant! She is delighted that her hands are turning red and rough, and in the midst of these humble occupations is looking forward to the scaffold! She has even attempted to discard shoes; went out somewhere barefoot and came back barefoot. I heard her washing her feet for a long time afterwards and then saw her come out, treading cautiously; they were evidently sore, poor thing, but her face was radiant with smiles as though she had found a treasure or been illuminated by the sun. Yes, Mariana is a brick! But when I try to talk to her of my feelings, a certain shame comes over me somehow, as though I were violating something

that was not my own, and then that glance … Oh, that awful devoted, irresistible glance! "Take me," it seems to say, "BUT REMEMBER… ." Enough of this! Is there not something higher and better in this world? In other words, put on your filthy coat and go among the people… Oh, yes, I am just going.

How I loathe this irritability, sensitiveness, impressionable- ness, fastidiousness, inherited from my aristocratic father! What right had he to bring me into this world, endowed with qualities quite unsuited to the sphere in which I must live? To create a bird and throw it in the water? An aesthetic amidst filth! A democrat, a lover of the people, yet the very smell of their filthy vodka makes me feel sick!

But it's too bad blaming my father. He was not responsible for my becoming a democrat.

Yes, Vladimir, I am in a bad plight. Grey, depressing thoughts are continually haunting me. Can it be, you will be asking me, that I have not met with anything consoling, any good living personality, however ignorant he might not be? How shall I tell you? I have run across someone—a decent clever chap, but unfortunately, however hard I may try to get nearer him, he has no need of either me or my pamphlets—that is the root of the matter! Pavel, a factoryhand here (he is Vassily's right hand, a clever fellow with his head screwed on the right way, a future "head," I think I wrote to you about him), well this Pavel has a friend, a peasant called Elizar, also a smart chap, as free and courageous as one would wish, but as soon as we get together there seems a dead wall between us! His face spells one big "No!" Then there was another man I ran across—he was a rather quarrelsome type by the way. "Don't you try to get around me, sir," he said. "What I want to know is would you give up your land now, or not?" "But I'm not a gentleman," I remonstrated. " Bless you!" he exclaimed, "you a common man and no more sense than that! Leave me alone, please!

Another thing I've noticed is that if anyone listens to you readily and takes your pamphlets at once, he is sure to be of an undesirable, brainless sort. Or you may chance upon some frightfully talkative individual who can do nothing but keep on repeating some favourite expression. One such nearly drove me mad; everything with him was "production." No matter what you said to him he came out with his "production," damn him! Just one more remark.

Do you remember some time ago there used to be a great deal of talk about "superfluous" people— Hamlets? Such "superfluous people" are

now to be met with among the peasants! They have their own characteristics of course and are for the most part inclined to consumption. They are interesting types and come to us readily, but as far as the cause is concerned they are ineffective, like all other Hamlets. Well, what can one do? Start a secret printing press? There are pamphlets enough as it is, some that say," Cross yourself and take up the hatchet," and others that say simply, "Take up the hatchet" without the crossing. Or should one write novels of peasant life with plenty of padding? They wouldn't get published, you know. Perhaps it might be better to take up the hatchet after all? But against whom, with whom, and what for? So that our state soldier may shoot us down with the state rifle? It would only be a complicated form of suicide! It would be better to make an end of yourself—you would at any rate know when and how, and choose the spot to aim at.

I am beginning to think that if some war were to break out, some people's war—I would go and take part in it, not so as to free others (free others while one's own are groaning under the yoke!!), but to make an end of myself.

Our friend Vassily, who gave us shelter here, is a lucky man. He belongs to our camp, but is so calm and quiet. He doesn't want to hurry over things. I should have quarrelled with another, but I can't with him. The secret lies not in his convictions, but in the man himself. Vassily has a character that you can't kindle, but he's all right nevertheless. He is with us a good deal, with Mariana. What surprises me is that although I love her and she loves me (I see you smiling at this, but the fact remains!) we have nothing to talk about, while she is constantly discussing and arguing with him and listening too. I am not jealous of him; he is trying to find a place for her somewhere, at any rate, she keeps on asking him to do so, but it makes me feel bitter to look at them both. And would you believe it—I have only to drop a hint about marrying and she would agree at once and the priest Zosim would put in an appearance, "Isaiah, rejoice!" and the rest of it. But this would not make it any easier for me and NOTHING WOULD BE CHANGED BY IT … Whatever you do, there is no way out of it! Life has cut me short, my dear Vladimir, as our little drunken tailor used to say, you remember, when he used to complain about his wife.

I have a feeling that it can't go on somehow, that something is preparing.

Have I not again and again said that the time has come for action? Well, so here we are in the thick of it.

I can't remember if I told you anything about another friend of mine—a relative of the Sipiagins. He will get himself into such a mess that it won't be easy for him to get out of it.

I quite meant finishing this letter and am still going on. It seems to me that nothing matters and yet I scribble verses. I don't read them to Mariana and she is not very anxious to hear them, but you have sometimes praised my poor attempts and most of all you'll keep them to yourself. I have been struck by a common phenomenon in Russia… But, however, let the verses speak for themselves-

SLEEP

After long absence I return to my native land, Finding no striking change there. The same dead, senseless stagnation; crumbling houses, crumbling walls, And the same filth, dirt, poverty, and misery. Unchanged the servile glance, now insolent, now dejected. Free have our people become, and the free arm Hangs as before like a whip unused. All, all as before. In one thing only may we equal Europe, Asia, and the World! Never before has such a fearful sleep oppressed our land.

All are asleep, on all sides are they; Through town and country, in carts and in sledges, By day or night, sitting or standing, The merchant and the official, and the sentinel at his post In biting snow and burning heat—all sleep. The judged ones doze, and the judge snores, And peasants plough and reap like dead men, Father, mother, children; all are asleep. He who beats, and he who is beaten. Alone the tavern of the tsar ne'er closes a relentless eye. So, grasping tight in hand the bottle, His brow at the Pole and his heel in the Caucasus, Holy Russia, our fatherland, lies in eternal sleep.

I am sorry, Vladimir. I never meant to write you such a melancholy letter without a few cheering words at the end. (You will no doubt tumble across some defects in the lines!) When shall I write to you again? Shall I ever write? But whatever happens to me I am sure you will never forget,

Your devoted friend,

A. N.

P.S.—Our people are asleep… But I have a feeling that if anything does wake them, it will not be what we think.

After writing the last line, Nejdanov flung down the pen. "Well, now you must try and sleep and forget all this nonsense, scribbler!" he exclaimed, and lay down on the bed. But it was long before he fell asleep.

The next morning Mariana woke him passing through his room on her way to Tatiana. He had scarcely dressed when she came back. She seemed excited, her face expressing delight and anxiety at the same time.

"Do you know, Aliosha, they say that in the province of T., quite near here, it has already begun!"

"What? What has begun? Who said so?"

"Pavel. They say the peasants are rising, refusing to pay taxes, collecting in mobs."

"Have you heard that yourself?"

"Tatiana told me. But here is Pavel himself. You had better ask him."

Pavel came in and confirmed what Mariana had said.

"There is certainly some disturbance in T.," he began, shaking his beard and screwing up his bright black eyes. "Sergai Mihailovitch must have had a hand in it. He hasn't been home for five days."

Nejdanov took his cap.

"Where are you off to?" Mariana asked.

"Why there of course," he replied, not raising his eyes and frowning, "I am going to T."

"Then I will come with you. You'll take me, won't you? Just let me get a shawl."

"It's not a woman's work," Nejdanov said irritably with his eyes still fixed on the floor.

"No, no! You do well to go, or Markelov would think you a coward … but I'm coming with you."

"I am not a coward," Nejdanov observed gloomily.

"I meant to say that he would have thought us both cowards. I am coming with you."

Mariana went into her own room to get a shawl, while Pavel gave an inward ha, ha, and quickly vanished. He ran to warn Solomin.

Mariana had not yet appeared, when Solomin came into Nejdanov's room. The latter was standing with his face to the window, his forehead resting on the palm of his hand and his elbow on the window-pane. Solomin touched him on the shoulder. He turned around quickly;

dishevelled and unwashed, Nejdanov had a strange wild look. Solomin, too, had changed during the last days. His face was yellow and drawn and his upper front teeth showed slightly— he, too, seemed agitated as far as it was possible for his well- balanced temperament to be so.

"Markelov could not control himself after all," he began. "This may turn out badly both for him and for others."

"I want to go and see what's going on there," Nejdanov observed.

"And I too," Mariana added as she appeared in the doorway.

Solomin turned to her quickly.

"I would not advise you to go, Mariana. You may give yourself away—and us, without meaning to, and without the slightest necessity. Let Nejdanov go and see how the land lies, if he wants to— and the sooner he's back the better! But why should you go?"

"I don't want to be parted from him."

"You will be in his way."

Mariana looked at Nejdanov. He was standing motionless with a set sullen expression on his face.

"But supposing there should be danger?" she asked.

Solomin smiled.

"Don't be afraid … when there's danger I will let you go."

Mariana took off her shawl without a word and sat down. Solomin then turned to Nejdanov.

"It would be a good thing for you to look about a little, Alexai. I dare say they exaggerate. Only do be careful. But, however, you will not be going alone. Come back as quickly as you can. Will you promise? Nejdanov? Will you promise?"

"Yes."

"For certain?

"I suppose so, since everybody here obeys you, including Mariana."

Nejdanov went out without saying goodbye. Pavel appeared from somewhere out of the darkness and ran down the stairs before him with a great clatter of his hob-nailed boots. Was HE then to accompany Nejdanov?

Solomin sat down beside Mariana.

"You heard Nejdanov's last word?"

"Yes. He is annoyed that I listen to you more than to him. But it's quite true. I love him and listen to you. He is dear to me… and you are near to me.

Solomin stroked her hand gently.

"This is a very unpleasant business," he observed at last. "If Markelov is mixed up in it then he's a lost man."

Mariana shuddered.

"Lost?"

"Yes. He doesn't do things by halves—and won't hide things for the sake of others."

"Lost! " Mariana whispered again as the tears rolled down her cheeks. "Oh, Vassily Fedotitch! I feel so sorry for him. But what makes you think that he won't succeed? Why must he inevitably be lost?"

"Because in such enterprises the first always perish even if they come off victorious. And in this thing not only the first and second, but the tenth and twentieth will perish—"

"Then we shall never live to see it?

"What you have in your mind—never. We shall never see it with our eyes; with these living eyes of ours. But with our spiritual … but that is another matter. We may see it in that way now; there is nothing to hinder us."

"Then why do you—"

"What?"

"Why do you follow this road?"

"Because there is no other. I mean that my aims are the same as Markelov's—but our paths are different."

"Poor Sergai Mihailovitch!" Mariana exclaimed sadly. Solomin passed his hand cautiously over hers.

"There, there, we know nothing as yet. We'll see what news Pavel brings back. In our calling one must be brave. The English have a proverb 'Never say die.' A very good proverb, I think, much better than our Russian, 'When trouble knocks, open the gates wide!' We mustn't meet trouble half way."

Solomin stood up.

"And the place you were going to find me?" Mariana asked suddenly. The tears were still shining on her cheeks, but there was no sadness in her eyes. Solomin sat down again.

"Are you in such a great hurry to get away from here?

"Oh, no! Only I wanted to do something useful."

"You are useful here, Mariana. Don't leave us yet, wait a little longer. What is it?" Solomin asked of Tatiana who was just coming in.

"Some sort of female is asking for Alexai Dmitritch," Tatiana replied, laughing and gesticulating with her hands.

"I said that there was no such person living here, that we did not know him at all, when she—"

"Who is she? "

"Why the female of course. She wrote her name on this piece of paper and asked me to bring it here and let her in, saying that if Alexai Dmitritch was really not at home, she could wait for him."

On the paper was written in large letters "Mashurina."

"Show her in," Solomin said. "You don't mind my asking her in here, Mariana, do you? She is also one of us."

"Not at all."

A few moments later Mashurina appeared in the doorway, in the same dress in which we saw her at the beginning of the first chapter.

Chapter 31

"Is Nejdanov not at home?" she asked, then catching sight of Solomin, came up to him and extended her hand.

"How do you do, Solomin?" She threw a side-glance at Mariana.

"He will be back directly," Solomin said. " But tell me how you came to know—"

"Markelov told me. Besides several people in the town already know that he's here."

"Really?"

"Yes. Somebody must have let it out. Besides Nejdanov has been recognised."

"For all the dressing up!" Solomin muttered to himself. "Allow me to introduce you," he said aloud, "Miss Sinitska, Miss Mashurina! Won't you sit down?"

Mashurina nodded her head slightly and sat down. "I have a letter for Nejdanov and a message for you, Solomin."

"What message? And from whom?"

"From someone who is well known to you … Well, is everything ready here?"

"Nothing whatever."

Mashurina opened her tiny eyes as wide as she could.

"Nothing?

"Nothing."

"Absolutely nothing?"

"Absolutely nothing."

"Is that what I am to say?"

"Exactly."

Mashurina became thoughtful and pulled a cigarette out of her pocket.

"Can I have a light?"

"Here is a match."

Mashurina lighted her cigarette.

"They expected something different," she began, "Altogether different from what you have here. However, that is your affair. I am not going to stay long. I only want to see Nejdanov and give him the letter."

"Where are you going to?

"A long way from here." (She was going to Geneva, but did not want Solomin to know as she did not quite trust him, and besides a stranger was present. Mashurina, who scarcely knew a word of German, was being sent to Geneva to hand over to a person absolutely unknown to her a piece of cardboard with a vine-branch sketched on it and two hundred and seventy-nine roubles.)

"And where is Ostrodumov? Is he with you?"

"No, but he's quite near. Got stuck on the way. He'll be here when he's wanted. Pemien can look after himself. There is no need to worry about him."

"How did you get here?"

"In a cart of course. How else could I have come? Give me another match, please."

Solomin gave her a light.

"Vassily Fedotitch!" A voice called out suddenly from the other side of the door. "Can you come out?"

"Who is it? What do you want?"

"Do come, please," the voice repeated insistently. "Some new workmen have come. They're trying to explain something, and Pavel Egoritch is not there."

Solomin excused himself and went out. Mashurina fixed her gaze on Mariana and stared at her for so long that the latter began to feel uncomfortable.

"Excuse me," Mashurina exclaimed suddenly in her hard abrupt voice, "I am a plain woman and don't know how to put these things. Don't be angry with me. You need not tell me if you don't wish to. Are you the girl who ran away from the Sipiagins?"

"Yes," Mariana replied, a little surprised.

"With Nejdanov?"

"Yes."

"Please give me your hand … and forgive me. You must be good since he loves you."

Mariana pressed Mashurina's hand.

"Have you known him long?"

"I knew him in St. Petersburg. That was what made me talk to you. Sergai Mihailovitch has also told me—"

"Oh Markelov! Is it long since you've seen him?

"No, not long. But he's gone away now."

"Where to?"

"Where he was ordered."

Mariana sighed.

"Oh, Miss Mashurina, I fear for him."

"In the first place, I'm not miss. You ought to cast off such manners. In the second, you say … 'I fear,' and that you must also cast aside. If you do not fear for yourself, you will leave off fearing for others. You must not think of yourself, nor fear for yourself. I dare say it's easy for me to talk like that. I am ugly, while you are beautiful. It must be so much harder for you." (Mariana looked down and turned away.) "Sergai Mihailovitch told me … He knew I had a letter for Nejdanov… 'Don't go to the factory,' he said, 'don't take the letter. It will upset everything there. Leave them alone! They are both happy… Don't interfere with them!' I should be glad not to interfere, but what shall I do about the letter?"

"Give it to him by all means," Mariana put in. "How awfully good Sergai Mihailovitch is! Will they kill him, Mashurina … or send him to Siberia?"

"Well, what then? Don't people come back from Siberia? And as for losing one's life; it is not all like honey to everybody. To some it is sweet, to others bitter. His life has not been over- sweet."

Mashurina gave Mariana a fixed searching look.

"How beautiful you are!" she exclaimed, "just like a bird! I don't think Alexai is coming… I'll give you the letter. It's no use waiting any longer.

"I will give it him, you may be sure."

Mashurina rested her cheek in her hand and for a long, long time did not speak.

"Tell me," she began, "forgive me for asking … do you love him?"

"Yes."

Mashurina shook her heavy head.

"There is no need to ask if he loves you. However, I had better be going, otherwise I shall be late. Tell him that I was here… give him my kind regards. Tell him Mashurina was here. You won't forget my name, will you? Mashurina. And the letter … but say, where have I put it?

Mashurina stood up, turned round as though she were rummaging in her pockets for the letter, and quickly raising a small piece of folded paper to her lips, swallowed it. "Oh, dear me! What have I done with it? Have I lost it? I must have dropped it. Dear me! Supposing some one should find it! I can't find it anywhere. It's turned out exactly as Sergai Mihailovitch wanted after all!"

"Look again," Mariana whispered. Mashurina waved her hand.

"It's no good. I've lost it."

Mariana came up to her.

"Well, then, kiss me."

Mashurina suddenly put her arms about Mariana and pressed her to her bosom with more than a woman's strength.

"I would not have done this for anybody," she said, a lump rising in her throat, "against my conscience … the first time! Tell him to be more careful … And you too. Be cautious. It will soon be very dangerous for everybody here, very dangerous. You had better both go away, while there's still time … Goodbye!" she added loudly with some severity. "Just one more thing… tell him … no, it's not necessary. It's nothing."

Mashurina went out, banging the door behind her, while Mariana stood perplexed in the middle of the room.

"What does it all mean? " she exclaimed at last. "This woman loves him more than I do! What did she want to convey by her hints? And why did Solomin disappear so suddenly, and why didn't he come back again?"

She began pacing up and down the room. A curious sensation of fear, annoyance, and amazement took possession of her. Why did she not go with Nejdanov? Solomin had persuaded her not to … but where is Solomin? And what is going on around here? Of course Mashurina did not give her the letter because of her love for Nejdanov. But how could she decide to disregard orders? Did she want to appear magnanimous? What right had she? And why was she, Mariana, so touched by her act? An unattractive woman interests herself in a young man … What is there

extraordinary about it? And why should Mashurina assume that Mariana's attachment to Nejdanov is stronger than the feelings of duty? And did Mariana ask for such a sacrifice? And what could the letter have contained? A call for speedy action? Well, and what then?

And Markelov? He is in danger … and what are we doing? Markelov spares us both, gives us the opportunity of being happy, does not part us… What makes him do it? Is it also magnaminity… or contempt?

And did we run away from that hateful house merely to live like turtle doves?

Thus Mariana pondered, while the feeling of agitation and annoyance grew stronger and stronger within her. Her pride was hurt. Why had everyone forsaken her? EVERYONE. This stout woman had called her a bird, a beauty… why not quite plainly, a doll? And why did Nejdanov not go alone, but with Pavel? It's just as if he needed someone to look after him! And what are really Solomin's convictions? It's quite clear that he's not a revolutionist! And could any one really think that he does not treat the whole thing seriously?

These were the thoughts that whirled round, chasing one another and becoming entangled in Mariana's feverish brain. Pressing her lips closely together and folding her arms like a man, she sat down by the window at last and remained immovable, straight up in her chair, all alertness and intensity, ready to spring up at any moment. She had no desire to go to Tatiana and work; she wanted to wait alone. And she sat waiting obstinately, almost angrily. From time to time her mood seemed strange and incomprehensible even to herself … Never mind. "Am I jealous? " flashed across her mind, but remembering poor Mashurina's figure she shrugged her shoulders and dismissed the idea.

Mariana had been waiting for a long time when suddenly she heard the sound of two persons' footsteps coming up the stairs. She fixed her eyes on the door … the steps drew nearer. The door opened and Nejdanov, supported under the arm by Pavel, appeared in the doorway. He was deadly pale, without a cap, his dishevelled hair hung in wet tufts over his forehead, he stared vacantly straight in front of him. Pavel helped him across the room (Nejdanov's legs were weak and shaky) and made him sit down on the couch.

Mariana sprang up from her seat.

"What is the meaning of this? What's the matter with him? Is he ill?"

As he settled Nejdanov, Pavel answered her with a smile, looking at her over his shoulder.

"You needn't worry. He'll soon be all right. It's only because he's not used to it."

"What's the matter? " Mariana persisted.

"He's only a little tipsy. Been drinking on an empty stomach; that's all."

Mariana bent over Nejdanov. He was half lying on the couch, his head sunk on his breast, his eyes closed. He smelled of vodka; he was quite drunk.

"Alexai!" escaped her lips.

He raised his heavy eyelids with difficulty, and tried to smile.

"Well, Mariana!" he stammered out, "you've always talked of sim- plification … so here I am quite simplified. Because the people are always drunk … and so … "

He ceased, then muttered something indistinctly to himself, closed his eyes, and fell asleep. Pavel stretched him carefully on the couch.

"Don't worry, Mariana Vikentievna," he repeated. "He'll sleep an hour or two and wake up as fresh as can be."

Mariana wanted to ask how this had happened, but her questions would have detained Pavel and she wanted to be alone … she did not wish Pavel to see him in this disgusting state before her. She walked away to the window while Pavel, who instantly understood her, carefully covered Nejdanov's legs with the skirts of his coat, put a pillow under his head, and observing once again, "It's nothing," went out on tiptoe.

Mariana looked round. Nejdanov's head was buried in the pillow and on his pale face there was an expression of fixed intensity as on the face of one dangerously ill.

"I wonder how it happened?" she thought.

Chapter 32

IT happened like this.

Sitting down beside Pavel in the cart, Nejdanov fell into a state of great excitement. As soon as they rolled out of the courtyard onto the high road leading to T. he began shouting out the most absurd things to the peasants he met on the way. "Why are you asleep? Rouse yourself! The time has come! Down with the taxes! Down with the landlords!"

Some of the peasants stared at him in amazement, others passed on without taking any notice of him, thinking that he was drunk; one even said when he got home that he had met a Frenchman on the way who was jabbering away at something he did not understand. Nejdanov had common sense enough to know that what he was doing was unutterably stupid and absurd had he not got himself up to such a pitch of excitement that he was no longer able to discriminate between sense and nonsense. Pavel tried to quiet him, saying that it was impossible to go on like that; that they were quite near a large village, the first on the borders of T., and that there they could look around… . But Nejdanov would not calm down, and at the same time his face bore a sad, almost despairing, expression. Their horse was an energetic, round little thing, with a clipped mane on its scraggy neck. It tugged at the reins, and its strong little legs flew as fast as they could, just as if it were conscious of bearing important people to the scene of action. Just before they reached the village, Nejdanov saw a group of about eight peasants standing by the side of the road at the closed doors of a granary. He instantly jumped out of the cart, rushed up to them, and began shouting at them, thumping his fists and gesticulating for about five minutes. The words "For Freedom! March on! Put the shoulder to the wheel!" could be distinguished from among the rest of his confused words.

The peasants, who had met before the granary for the purpose of discussing how to fill it once more—if only to show that they were doing something (it was the communal granary and consequently empty)—fixed their eyes on Nejdanov and seemed to listen to him with

the greatest attention, but they had evidently not understood a word he had said, for no sooner was his back turned, shouting for the last time "Freedom!" as he rushed away, when one of them, the most sagacious of the lot, shook his head saying, "What a severe one!" "He must be an officer," another remarked, to which the wise one said: "We know all about that—he doesn't talk for nothing. We'll have to pay the piper."

"Heavens! what nonsense this all is! " Nejdanov thought to himself, as he sat down next to Pavel in the cart. "But then none of us know how to get at the people—perhaps this is the right way after all! Who knows? Go on! Does your heart ache? Let it!"

They found themselves in the main street of the village in the middle of which a number of people were gathered together before a tavern. Nejdanov, paying no heed to Pavel, who was trying to hold him back, leapt down from the cart with a cry of "Brothers!" The crowd made way for him and he again began preaching, looking neither to right nor left, as if furious and weeping at the same time. But things turned out quite differently than with his former attempt at the barn. An enormous fellow with a clean- shaven, vicious face, in a short greasy coat, high boots, and a sheepskin cap, came up to him and clapped him on the shoulder.

"All right! my fine fellow!" he bawled out in a wheezy voice; "but wait a bit! good deeds must be rewarded. Come along in here. It'll be much better talking in there." He pulled Nejdanov into the tavern, the others streamed in after them. "Michaitch!" the fellow shouted, "twopennyworth! My favourite drink! I want to treat a friend. Who he is, what's his family, and where he's from, only the devil knows! Drink!" he said, turning to Nejdanov and handing him a heavy, full glass, wet all over on the outside, as though perspiring, "drink, if you really have any feeling for us!" "Drink!" came a chorus of voices. Nejdanov, who seemed as if in a fever, seized the glass and with a cry of " I drink to you, children!" drank it off at a gulp. Ugh! He drank it off with the same desperate heroism with which he would have flung himself in storming a battery or on a line of bayonets. But what was happening to him? Something seemed to have struck his spine, his legs, burned his throat, his chest, his stomach, made the tears come into his eyes. A shudder of disgust passed all over him. He began shouting at the top of his voice to drown the throbbing in his head. The dark tavern room suddenly became hot and thick and suffocating—and people, people everywhere! Nejdanov began talking, talking incessantly, shouting furiously, in exasperation, shaking broad rough hands, kissing prickly beards… . The enormous fellow in the greasy coat kissed him too, nearly breaking his

ribs. This fellow turned out to be a perfect fiend. "I'll wring the neck," he shouted, "I'll wring the neck of anyone who dares to offend our brother! And what's more, I'll make mincemeat of him too … I'll make him cry out! That's nothing to me. I was a butcher and know how to do such jobs!" At this he held up an enormous fist covered with freckles. Someone again shouted, "Drink!" and Nejdanov again swallowed a glass of the filthy poison. But this second time was truly awful! Blunt hooks seemed to be tearing him to pieces inside. His head was in a whirl, green circles swam before his eyes. A hubbub arose … 0h horror! a third glass. Was it possible he emptied that too? He seemed to be surrounded by purple noses, dusty heads of hair, tanned necks covered with nets of wrinkles. Rough hands seized him. "Go on!" they bawled out in angry voices, "talk away! The day before yesterday another stranger talked like that. Go on." The earth seemed reeling under Nejdanov's feet, his voice sounded strange to his own ears as though coming from a long way off… Was it death or what?

And suddenly he felt the fresh air blowing about his face, no more pushing and shoving, no more stench of spirits, sheep-skin, tar, nor leather… . He was again sitting beside Pavel in the cart, struggling at first and shouting, "Where are you off to? Stop! I haven't had time to tell them anything— I must explain… " and then added, "and what are your own ideas on the subject, you sly-boots?"

"It would certainly be well if there were no gentry and the land belonged to us, of course," Pavel replied, " but there's been no such order from the government." He quietly turned the horse's head and, suddenly lashing it on the back with the reins, set off at full gallop, away from this din and uproar, back to the factory.

Nejdanov sat dozing, rocked by the motion of the cart, while the wind played pleasantly about his face and kept back gloomy depressing thoughts.

He was annoyed that he had not been allowed to say all that he had wanted to say. Again the wind caressed his overheated face.

And then—a momentary glimpse of Mariana—a burning sense of shame—and sleep, deep, sound sleep…

Pavel told Solomin all this afterwards, not hiding the fact that he did not attempt to prevent Nejdanov from drinking— otherwise he could not have got him out of the whirl. The others would not have let him go.

"When he seemed to be getting very feeble, I asked them to let him off, and they agreed to, on condition that I gave them a shilling, so I gave it them."

"You acted quite rightly," Solomin said, approvingly.

Nejdanov slept, while Mariana sat at the window looking out into the garden. Strange to say the angry, almost wicked, thoughts that had been tormenting her until Nejdanov and Pavel arrived had completely disappeared. Nejdanov himself was not in the least repulsive or disgusting to her; she was only sorry for him. She knew quite well that he was not a debauchee, a drunkard, and was wondering what she would say to him when he woke up; something friendly and affectionate to minimise the first sting of conscience and shame. "I must try and get him to tell me himself how it all happened," she thought.

She was not disturbed, but depressed—hopelessly depressed. It seemed as if a breath of the real atmosphere of the world towards which she was striving had blown on her suddenly, making her shudder at its coarseness and darkness. What Moloch was this to which she was going to sacrifice herself?

But no! It could not be! This was merely an incident, it would soon pass over. A momentary impression that had struck her so forcibly because it had happened so unexpectedly. She got up, walked over to the couch on which Nejdanov was lying, took out her pocket-handkerchief and wiped his pale forehead, which was painfully drawn, even in sleep, and smoothed back his hair…

She pitied him as a mother pities her suffering child. But it was somewhat painful for her to look at him, so she went quietly into her own room, leaving the door unlocked.

She did not attempt to take any work in her hand. She sat down and thoughts began crowding in upon her. She felt how the time was slipping away, how one minute flew after another, and the sensation was even pleasant to her. Her heart beat fast and again she seemed to be waiting for something.

What has become of Solomin?

The door creaked softly and Tatiana came into the room. "What do you want?" Mariana asked with a shade of annoyance.

"Mariana Vikentievna," Tatiana began in an undertone, "don't worry, my dear. Such things happen every day. Besides, the Lord be thanked—"

"I am not worrying at all, Tatiana Osipovna," Mariana interrupted her. "Alexai Dmitritch is a little indisposed, nothing very serious!"

"That's all right! I wondered why you didn't come, and thought there might be something the matter with you. But still I wouldn't have come in to you. It's always best not to interfere. But someone has come— a little lame man, the Lord knows who he is— and demands to see Alexai Dmitritch! I wonder what for? This morning that female came for him and now this little cripple. 'If Alexai Dmitritch is not at home,' he says, 'then I must see Vassily Fedotitch! I won't go away without seeing him. It's on a very urgent matter.' We wanted to get rid of him, as we did of that woman, told him Vassily Fedotitch was not at home, but he is determined to see him even if he has to wait until midnight. There he is walking about in the yard. Come and have a look at him through the little window in the corridor. Perhaps you'll recognise him."

Mariana followed Tatiana out into the corridor, and on passing Nejdanov was again struck by that painful frown on his forehead and passed her pocket-handkerchief over it a second time.

Through the dusty little window she caught a glimpse of the visitor whom Tatiana had spoken of. He was unknown to her. At this moment Solomin appeared from a corner of the house.

The little cripple rushed up to him and extended his hand. Solomin pressed it. He was obviously acquainted with him. They both disappeared… Soon their footsteps were heard coming up the stairs. They were coming to see her.

Mariana fled into her own room and remained standing in the middle of it, hardly able to breathe. She was mortally afraid … but of what? She did not know herself.

Solomin's head appeared through the door.

"Mariana Vikentievna, can I come in? I have brought someone whom it's absolutely necessary for you to see."

Mariana merely nodded her head in reply and behind Solomin in walked— Paklin.

Chapter 33

"I AM a friend of your husband's," he said, bowing very low, as if anxious to conceal his frightened face, "and also of Vassily Fedotitch. I hear Alexai Dmitritch is asleep and not very well. Unfortunately, I have brought bad news. I have already told Vassily Fedotitch something about it and am afraid decisive measures will have to be taken.

Paklin's voice broke continually, like that of a man who was tortured by thirst. The items of news he had to communicate were certainly very unpleasant ones. Some peasants had seized Markelov and brought him to the town. The stupid clerk had betrayed Golushkin, who was now under arrest, he in his turn was betraying everything and everybody, wanted to go over to the Orthodox Church, had offered to present a portrait of the Bishop Filaret to the public school, and had already given five thousand roubles to be distributed among crippled soldiers. There was not a shadow of a doubt that he had informed against Nejdanov; the police might make a raid upon the factory any moment. Vassily Fedotitch was also in danger. "As for myself," Paklin added, "I am surprised that I'm still allowed to roam at large, although it's true that I've never really interested myself in practical politics or taken part in any schemes. I have taken advantage of this oversight on the part of the police to put you on your guard and find out what had best be done to avoid any unpleasantness."

Mariana listened to Paklin to the end. She did not seem alarmed; on the other hand she was quite calm. But something must really be done! She fixed her eyes on Solomin.

He was also composed; only around his lips there was the faintest movement of the muscles; but it was not his habitual smile.

Solomin understood the meaning of Mariana's glance; she waited for him to say what had best be done.

"It's a very awkward business," he began; "I don't think it would do Nejdanov any harm to go into hiding for a time. But, by the way, how did you get to know that he was here, Mr. Paklin?"

Paklin gave a wave of the hand.

"A certain individual told me. He had seen him preaching about the neighbourhood and had followed him, though with no evil intent. He is a sympathiser. Excuse me," he added, turning to Mariana, "is it true that our friend Nejdanov has been very … very careless?"

"It's no good blaming him now," Solomin began again. "What a pity we can't talk things over with him now, but by tomorrow he will be all right again. The police don't do things as quickly as you seem to imagine. You will have to go away with him, Mariana Vikentievna."

"Certainly," she said resolutely, a lump rising in her throat.

"Yes," Solomin said, "we must think it over, consider ways and means."

"May I make a suggestion?" Paklin began. "It entered my head as I was coming along here. I must tell you, by the way, that I dismissed the cabman from the town a mile away from here."

"What is your suggestion?" Solomin asked.

"Let me have some horses at once and I'll gallop off to the Sipiagins."

"To the Sipiagins!" Mariana exclaimed. "Why?"

"You will see."

"But do you know them?"

"Not at all! But listen. Do think over my suggestion thoroughly. It seems to me a brilliant one. Markelov is Sipiagin's brother- in-law, his wife's brother, isn't that so? Would this gentleman really make no attempt to save him? And as for Nejdanov himself, granting that Mr. Sipiagin is most awfully angry with him, still he has become a relation of his by marrying you. And the danger hanging over our friend—"

"I am not married," Mariana observed.

Paklin started.

"What? Haven't managed it all this time! Well, never mind," he added, "one can pretend a little. All the same, you will get married directly. There seems nothing else to be done! Take into consideration the fact that up until now Sipiagin has not persecuted you, which shows him to be a man capable of a certain amount of generosity. I see that you don't

like the expression— well, a certain amount of pride. Why should we not take advantage of it? Consider for yourself!"

Mariana raised her head and passed her hand through her air.

"You can take advantage of whatever you like for Markelov, Mr. Paklin… or for yourself, but Alexai and I do not desire the protection or patronage of Mr. Sipiagin. We did not leave his house only to go knocking at his door as beggars. The pride and generosity of Mr. Sipiagin and his wife have nothing whatever to do with us!"

"Such sentiments are extremely praiseworthy," Paklin replied (" How utterly crushed!" he thought to himself), "though, on the other hand, if you think of it … However, I am ready to obey you. I will exert myself only on Markelov's account, our good Markelov! I must say, however, that he is not his blood relation, but only related to him through his wife—while you—"

"Mr Paklin, I beg of you!"

"I'm sorry… Only I can't tell you how disappointing it is— Sipiagin is a very influential man."

"Have you no fears for yourself?" Solomin asked.

Paklin drew himself up.

"There are moments when one must not think of oneself!" he said proudly. And he was thinking of himself all the while. Poor little man! he wanted to run away as fast as he could. On the strength of the service rendered him, Sipiagin might, if need be, speak a word in his favour. For he too—say what he would—was implicated, he had listened and had chattered a little himself.

"I don't think your suggestion is a bad one," Solomin observed at last," although there is not much hope of success. At any rate there is no harm in trying."

"Of course not. Supposing they pitch me out by the scruff of the neck, what harm will it do?"

"That won't matter very much" ("Merci," Paklin thought to himself). "What is the time? " Solomin asked. " Five o'clock. We mustn't dawdle. You shall have the horses directly. Pavel!"

But instead of Pavel, Nejdanov appeared in the doorway. He staggered and steadied himself on the doorpost. He opened his mouth feebly, looked around with his glassy eyes, comprehending nothing. Paklin was the first to approach him.

"Aliosha!" he exclaimed, "don't you know me?" Nejdanov stared at him, blinking slowly.

"Paklin? " he said at last.

"Yes, it is I. Aren't you well?"

"No … I'm not well. But why are you here?"

"Why?" … But at this moment Mariana stealthily touched Paklin on the elbow. He turned around and saw that she was making signs to him. "Oh, yes! " he muttered. "Yes… . You see, Aliosha," he added aloud, "I've come here upon a very important matter and must go away at once. Solomin will tell you all about it—and Mariana—Mariana Vikentievna. They both fully approve of what I am going to do. The thing concerns us all. No, no," he put in hastily in response to a look and gesture from Mariana. "The thing concerns Markelov; our mutual friend Markelov; it concerns him alone. But I must say goodbye now. Every minute is precious. Goodbye, Aliosha … We'll see each other again sometime. Vassily Fedotitch, can you come with me to see about the horses?"

"Certainly. Mariana, I wanted to ask you to be firm, but that is not necessary. You're a brick!"

"Yes, yes," Paklin chimed in, "you are just like a Roman maiden in Cato's time! Cato of Utica! We must be off, Vassily Fedotitch, come along!"

"There's plenty of time," Solomin observed with a faint smile. Nejdanov stood on one side to allow them room to pass out, but there was the same vacant expression in his eyes. After they had gone he took a step or two forward and sat down on a chair facing Mariana.

"Alexai," she began, "everything has been found out. Markelov has been seized by the very peasants he was trying to better, and is now under arrest in this town, and so is the merchant with whom you dined once. I dare say the police will soon be here for us too. Paklin has gone to Sipiagin."

"Why?" Nejdanov asked in a scarcely audible whisper. But there was a keen look in his eyes—his face assumed it's habitual expression. The stupor had left him instantly.

"To try and find out if he would be willing to intercede."

Nejdanov sat up straight.

"For us?

"No, for Markelov. He wanted to ask him to intercede for us too … but I wouldn't let him. Have I done well, Alexai?

"Have you done well?" Nejdanov asked and without rising from his chair, stretched out his arms to her. "Have you done well?" he repeated, drawing her close to him, and pressing his face against her waist, suddenly burst into tears.

"What is the matter? What is the matter with you?" Mariana exclaimed. And as on the day when he had fallen on his knees before her, trembling and breathless in a torrent of passion, she laid both her hands on his trembling head. But what she felt now was quite different from what she had felt then. Then she had given herself up to him—had submitted to him and only waited to hear what he would say next, but now she pitied him and only wondered what she could do to calm him.

"What is the matter with you?" she repeated. "Why are you crying? Not because you came home in a somewhat… strange condition? It can't be! Or are you sorry for Markelov—afraid for me, for yourself? Or is it for our lost hopes? You did not really expect that everything would go off smoothly!"

Nejdanov suddenly lifted his bead.

"It's not that, Mariana," he said, mastering his sobs by an effort, "I am not afraid for either of us … but … I am sorry.

"For whom?"

"For you, Mariana! I am sorry that you should have united your fate with a man who is not worthy of you."

"Why not?"

"If only because he can be crying at a moment as this!"

"It is not you but your nerves that are crying!"

"You can't separate me from my nerves! But listen, Mariana, look me in the face; can you tell me now that you do not regret—"

"What?"

"That you ran away with me."

"No!"

"And would you go with me further? Anywhere?"

"Yes!"

"Really? Mariana … really?

"Yes. I have given you my word, and so long as you remain the man I love—I shall not take it back."

Nejdanov remained sitting on the chair, Mariana standing before him. His arms were about her waist, her's were resting on his shoulders.

"Yes, no," Nejdanov thought … "when I last held her in my arms like this, her body was at least motionless, but now I can feel it—against her will, perhaps— shrink away from me gently!"

He loosened his arms and Mariana did in fact move away from him a little.

"If that's so," he said aloud, "if we must run away from here before the police find us … I think it wouldn't be a bad thing if we were to get married. We may not find another such accommodating priest as Father Zosim!"

"I am quite ready," Mariana observed.

Nejdanov gave her a searching glance.

"A Roman maiden!" he exclaimed with a sarcastic half-smile. "What a feeling of duty!"

Mariana shrugged her shoulders.

"We must tell Solomin."

"Yes … Solomin … " Nejdanov drawled out. "But he is also in danger. The police would arrest him too. It seems to me that he also took part in things and knew even more than we did."

"I don't know about that," Mariana observed. "He never speaks of himself!

"Not as I do!" Nejdanov thought. "That was what she meant to imply. Solomin … Solomin!" he added after a pause. "Do you know, Mariana, I should not be at all sorry if you had linked your fate forever with a man like Solomin … or with Solomin himself."

Mariana gave Nejdanov a penetrating glance in her turn. "You had no right to say that," she observed at last.

"I had no right! In what sense am I to take that? Does it mean that you love me, or that I ought not to touch upon this question generally speaking?"

"You had no right," Mariana repeated.

Nejdanov lowered his head.

"Mariana!" he exclaimed in a slightly different tone of voice.

"Yes?

"If I were to ask you now … now … you know what … But no, I will not ask anything of you . . goodbye."

He got up and went out; Mariana did not detain him. Nejdanov sat down on the couch and covered his face with his hands. He was afraid of his own thoughts and tried to stop thinking. He felt that some sort of dark, underground hand had clutched at the very root of his being and would not let him go. He knew that the dear, sweet creature he had left in the next room would not come out to him and he dared not go to her. What for? What would he say to her?

Firm, rapid footsteps made him open his eyes. Solomin passed through his room, knocked at Mariana's door, and went in.

"Honour where honour is due!" Nejdanov whispered bitterly.

Chapter 34

IT was already ten o'clock in the evening; in the drawing-room of the Arjanov house Sipiagin, his wife, and Kollomietzev were sitting over a game at cards when a footman entered and announced that an unknown gentleman, a certain Mr. Paklin, wished to see Boris Andraevitch upon a very urgent business.

"So late!" Valentina Mihailovna exclaimed, surprised.

What? "Boris Andraevitch asked, screwing up his handsome nose; "what did you say the gentleman's name was?"

Mr. Paklin, sir."

"Paklin!" Kollomietzev exclaimed; "a real country name. Paklin … Solomin … De vrais noms ruraux, hein?"

"Did you say," Boris Andraevitch continued, still turned towards the footman with his nose screwed up, "that the business was an urgent one?"

"The gentleman said so, sir."

"H'm… . No doubt some beggar or intriguer."

"Or both," Kollomietzev chimed in.

"Very likely. Ask him into my study." Boris Andraevitch got up. "Pardon, ma bonne. Have a game of ecarte till I come back, unless you would like to wait for me. I won't he long."

"Nous causerons … Allez!" Kollomietzev said.

When Sipiagin entered his study and caught sight of Paklin's poor, feeble little figure meekly leaning up against the door between the wall and the fireplace, he was seized by that truly ministerial sensation of haughty compassion and fastidious condescension so characteristic of the St. Petersburg bureaucrat. "Heavens! What a miserable little wretch!" he thought; "and lame too, I believe!"

"Sit down, please," he said aloud, making use of some of his most benevolent baritone notes and throwing back his head, sat down before his guest did. "You are no doubt tired from the journey. Sit down, please, and tell me about this important matter that has brought you so late."

"Your excellency," Paklin began, cautiously dropping into an armchair, "I have taken the liberty of coming to you—"

"Just a minute, please," Sipiagin interrupted him, "I think I've seen you before. I never forget faces. But er… er … really… where have I seen you?"

You are not mistaken, your excellency. I had the honour of meeting you in St. Petersburg at a certain person's who … who has since … unfortunately … incurred your displeasure—"

Sipiagin jumped up from his chair.

"Why, at Mr. Nejdanov's? I remember now. You haven't come from him by the way, have you?"

"Not at all, your excellency; on the contrary … I—"

Sipiagin sat down again.

"That's good. For had you come on his account I should have asked you to leave the house at once. I cannot allow any mediator between myself and Mr. Nejdanov. Mr. Nejdanov has insulted me in a way which cannot be forgotten … I am above any feelings of revenge, but I don't wish to know anything of him, nor of the girl— more depraved in mind than in heart " (Sipiagin had repeated this phrase at least thirty times since Mariana ran away), "who could bring herself to abandon a home that had sheltered her, to become the mistress of a nameless adventurer! It is enough for them that I am content to forget them."

At this last word Sipiagin waved his wrist into space.

"I forget them, my dear sir!"

"Your excellency, I have already told you that I did not come from them in particular, but I may inform your excellency that they are legally married … " ("It's all the same," Paklin thought; "I said that I would lie and so here I am. Never mind!")

Sipiagin moved his head from left to right on the back of his chair.

"It does not interest me in the least, sir. It only makes one foolish marriage the more in the world— that's all. But what is this urgent matter to which I am indebted for the pleasure of your visit?"

"Ugh! you cursed director of a department!" Paklin thought, "I'll soon make you pull a different face! "Your wife's brother," he said aloud, "Mr. Markelov, has been seized by the peasants whom he had been inciting to rebellion, and is now under arrest in the governor's house."

Sipiagin jumped up a second time.

"What … what did you say?" he blurted out, not at all in his accustomed ministerial baritones, but in an extremely undignified manner.

"I said that your brother-in-law has been seized and is in chains. As soon as I heard of it, I procured horses and came straight away to tell you. I thought that I might be rendering a service to you and to the unfortunate man whom you may be able to save!"

"I am extremely grateful to you," Sipiagin said in the same feeble tone of voice, and violently pressing a bell, shaped like a mushroom, he filled the whole house with its clear metallic ring. "I am extremely grateful to you," he repeated more sharply, "but I must tell you that a man who can bring himself to trample under foot all laws, human and divine, were he a hundred times related to me— is in my eyes not unfortunate; he is a criminal!"

A footman came in quickly.

"Your orders, sir?

"The carriage! the carriage and four horses this minute! I am going to town. Philip and Stepan are to come with me!" The footman disappeared. "Yes, sir, my brother-in-law is a criminal! I am going to town not to save him! Oh, no!"

"But, your excellency—"

"Such are my principles, my dear sir, and I beg you not to annoy me by your objections!"

Sipiagin began pacing up and down the room, while Paklin stared with all his might. "Ugh! you devil!" he thought, "I heard that you were a liberal, but you're just like a hungry lion!"

The door was flung open and Valentina Mihailovna came into the room with hurried steps, followed by Kollomietzev.

"What is the matter, Boris? Why have you ordered the carriage? Are you going to town? What has happened?"

Sipiagin went up to his wife and took her by the arm, between the elbow and wrist. "Il faut vous armer de courage, ma chere. Your brother has been arrested."

"My brother? Sergai? What for?"

He has been preaching socialism to the peasants." (Kollomietzev gave a faint little scream.) "Yes! preaching revolutionary ideas, making propaganda! They seized him—and gave him up. He is now under arrest in the town."

"Madman! But who told you?"

"This Mr … Mr … what's his name? Mr. Konopatin brought the news."

Valentina Mihailovna glanced at Paklin; the latter bowed dejectedly. ("What a glorious woman!" he thought. Even in such difficult moments … alas! how susceptible Paklin was to feminine beauty!)

"And you want to go to town at this hour?"

"I think the governor will still be up."

"I always said it would end like this," Kollomietzev put in. "It couldn't have been otherwise! But what dears our peasants are really! Pardon, madame, c'est votre frere! Mais la verite avant tout!"

"Do you really intend going to town, Boris? " Valentina Mihailovna asked.

"I feel absolutely certain," Kollomietzev continued, "that that tutor, Mr. Nejdanov, is mixed up in this. J'en mettrais ma main au feu. It's all one gang! Haven't they seized him? Don't you know?"

Sipiagin waved his wrist again.

"I don't know—and don't want to know! By the way," he added, turning to his wife, " il parait qu'il sont maries."

"Who said so? That same gentleman?" Valentina Mihailovna looked at Paklin again, this time with half-closed eyes.

"Yes."

"In that case," Kollomietzev put in, "he must know where they are. Do you know where they are? Do you know? Eh? Do you know?"

Kollomietzev took to walking up and down in front of Paklin as if to cut off his way, although the latter had not betrayed the slightest inclination of wanting to run away. "Why don't you speak? Answer me! Do you know, eh? Do you know?"

"Even if I knew," Paklin began, annoyed; his wrath had risen up in him at last and his eyes flashed fire: "even if I knew I would not tell you."

"Oh … oh … " Kollomietzev muttered. "Do you hear? Do you hear? This one too—this one too is of their gang!"

"The carriage is ready!" a footman announced loudly. Sipiagin with a quick graceful movement seized his hat, but Valentina Mihailovna was so insistent in her persuasions for him to put off the journey until the morning and brought so many convincing arguments to bear—such as: that it was pitch dark outside, that everybody in town would be asleep, that he would only upset his nerves and might catch cold—that Sipiagin at length came to agree with her.

"I obey!" he exclaimed, and with the same graceful gesture, not so rapid this time, replaced his hat on the table.

"I shall not want the carriage now," he said to the footman, "but see that it's ready at six o'clock in the morning! Do you hear? 'You can go now! But stay! See that the gentleman's carriage is sent off and the driver paid… I What? Did you say anything, Mr. Konopatin? I am going to take you to town with me tomorrow, Mr. Konopatin! What did you say? I can't hear … Do you take vodka? Give Mr. Konopatin some vodka! No? You don't drink? In that case … Feodor! take the gentleman into the green room! Goodnight, Mr. Kono-"

Paklin lost all patience.

"Paklin!" he shouted, "my name is Paklin!"

"Oh, yes … it makes no difference. A bit alike, you know. What a powerful voice you have for your spare build! Till tomorrow, Mr. Paklin… . Have I got it right this time? Simeon, vous viendrez. avec nous?"

"Je crois bien!"

Paklin was conducted into the green room and locked in. He distinctly heard the key turned in the English lock as he got into bed. He scolded himself severely for his "brilliant idea" and slept very badly.

He was awakened early the next morning at half-past five and given coffee. As he drank it a footman with striped shoulder- knots stood over him with the tray in his hand, shifting from one leg to the other as though he were saying, "Hurry up! the gentlemen are waiting!" He was taken downstairs. The carriage was already waiting at the door. Kollomietzev's open carriage was also there. Sipiagin appeared on the steps in a cloak made of camel's hair with a round collar. Such cloaks had long ago ceased to be worn except by a certain important dignitary whom Sipiagin pandered to and wished to imitate. On important official occasions he invariably put on this cloak.

Sipiagin greeted Paklin affably, and with an energetic movement of the hand pointed to the carriage and asked him to take his seat. "Mr.

Paklin, you are coming with me, Mr. Paklin! Put your bag on the box, Mr. Paklin! I am taking Mr. Paklin," he said, emphasising the word "Paklin" with special stress on the letter a. "You have an awful name like that and get insulted when people change it for you—so here you are then! Take your fill of it! Mr. Paklin! Paklin!" The unfortunate name rang out clearly in the cool morning air. It was so keen as to make Kollomietzev, who came out after Sipiagin, exclaim several times in French…

"Brrr! brrr! brrr!" He wrapped his cloak more closely about him and seated himself in his elegant carriage with the hood thrown back. (Had his poor friend Michael Obrenovitch, the Servian prince, seen it, he would certainly have bought one like it at Binder's… . "Vous savez Binder, le grand carrossier des Champs Elysees?")

Valentina Mihailovna, still in her night garments, peeped out from behind the half-open shutters of her bedroom. Sipiagin waved his hand to her from the carriage.

"Are you quite comfortable, Mr. Paklin? Go on!"

"Je vous recommande mon frere, epargnez-le!" Valentina Mihailovna said.

"Soyez tranquille!" Kollomietzev exclaimed, glancing up at her quickly from under the brim of his travelling cap—one of his own special design with a cockade in it—"C'est surtout l'autre, qu'il faut pincer!"

"Go on!" Sipiagin exclaimed again. "You are not cold, Mr. Paklin? Go on!"

The two carriages rolled away.

For about ten minutes neither Sipiagin nor Paklin pronounced a single word. The unfortunate Sila, in his shabby little coat and crumpled cap, looked even more wretched than usual in contrast to the rich background of dark blue silk with which the carriage was upholstered. He looked around in silence at the delicate pale blue blinds, which flew up instantly at the mere press of a button, at the soft white sheep-skin rug at their feet, at the mahogany box in front with a movable desk for letters and even a shelf for books. (Boris Andraevitch never worked in his carriage, but he liked people to think that he did, after the manner of Thiers, who always worked when travelling.) Paklin felt shy. Sipiagin glanced at him once or twice over his clean-shaven cheek, and with a pompous deliberation pulled out of a side- pocket a silver cigar-case with a curly monogram and a Slavonic band and offered him … really offered him a

cigar, holding it gently between the second and third fingers of a hand neatly clad in an English glove of yellow dogskin.

"I don't smoke," Paklin muttered.

"Really!" Sipiagin exclaimed and lighted the cigar himself, an excellent regalia.

"I must tell you … my dear Mr. Paklin," he began, puffing gracefully at his cigar and sending out delicate rings of delicious smoke, "that I am … really … very grateful to you. I might have … seemed … a little severe… last night … which does not really … do justice to my character … believe me." (Sipiagin purposely hesitated over his speech.) "But just put yourself in my place, Mr. Paklin!" (Sipiagin rolled the cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other.) "The position I occupy places me … so to speak … before the public eye, and suddenly, without any warning … my wife's brother … compromises himself … and me, in this impossible way! Well, Mr. Paklin? But perhaps you think that it's nothing?"

"I am far from thinking that, your excellency."

"You don't happen to know exactly why … and where he was arrested?"

"I heard that he was arrested in T. district."

"Who told you so?"

"A certain person."

"Of course it could hardly have been a bird. But who was this person?"

"An assistant … of the director of the governor's office—"

"What's his name?"

"The director's?"

No, the assistant's."

"His name is … Ulyashevitch. He is a very honest man, your excellency. As soon as I heard of the affair, I hastened to tell you."

"Yes, yes. I am very grateful to you indeed. But what utter madness! downright madness! Don't you think so, Mr. Paklin?"

"Utter madness!" Paklin exclaimed, while the perspiration rolled down his back in a hot stream. "it just shows," he continued, "the folly of not understanding the peasant. Mr. Markelov, so far as I know him, has a very kind and generous heart, but he has no conception of what the Russian peasant is really like." (Paklin glanced at Sipiagin who sat slightly turned towards him, gazing at him with a cold, though not unfriendly,

light in his eyes.) "The Russian peasant can never be induced to revolt except by taking advantage of that devotion of his to some high authority, some tsar. Some sort of legend must be invented—you remember Dmitrius the pretender—some sort of royal sign must be shown him, branded on the breast."

"Just like Pugatchev," Sipiagin interrupted him in a tone of voice which seemed to imply that he had not yet forgotten his history and that it was really not necessary for Paklin to go on. "What madness! what madness! "he added, and became wrapped in the contemplation of the rings of smoke as they rose quickly one after another from the end of his cigar.

"Your excellency," Paklin began apologetically, "I have just said that I didn't smoke … but it was not true. I do smoke and your cigar smells so nice—"

"Eh? What?" Sipiagin asked as if waking up; and without giving Paklin time to repeat his request, he proved in the most unmistakable manner that he had heard every word, and had merely asked his questions for the sake of dignity, by offering him his cigar-case.

Paklin took a cigar gratefully and lighted it with care.

"Here's a good opportunity," he thought, but Sipiagin had anticipated him.

"I remember your saying … " he began carelessly, stopping to look at his cigar and pulling his hat lower over his forehead, "you spoke … of … of that friend of yours, who married my … niece. Do you ever see them? They've settled not far from here, eh?"

("Take care! be on your guard, Sila!" Paklin thought.)

"I have only seen them once, your excellency. They are living … certainly … not very far from here."

"You quite understand, I hope," Sipiagin continued in the same tone, "that I can take no further serious interest—as I explained to you—either in that frivolous girl or in your friend. Heaven knows that I have no prejudices, but really, you will agree with me, this is too much! So foolish, you know. However, I suppose they were more drawn together by politics … " ("politics!" he repeated, shrugging his shoulders) "than by any other feeling!"

"I think so too, your excellency!"

"Yes, Mr. Nejdanov was certainly revolutionary. To do him justice he made no secret of his opinions."

"Nejdanov," Paklin ventured, "may have been carried away, but his heart—"

"Is good," Sipiagin put in; "I know, like Markelov's. They all have good hearts. He has no doubt also been mixed up in this affair … and will be implicated… . I suppose I shall have to intercede for him too!"

Paklin clasped his hands to his breast.

Oh, your excellency! Extend your protection to him! He fully … deserves … your sympathy."

Sipiagin snorted.

"You think so?"

"At any rate if not for him … for your niece's sake; for his wife!" ("Heavens! What lies I'm telling," Paklin thought.)

Sipiagin half-closed his eyes.

"I see that you're a very devoted friend. That's a very good quality, very praiseworthy, young man. And so you said they lived in this neighbourhood?"

"Yes, your excellency; in a large establishment—" Here Paklin bit his tongue.

"Why, of course, at Solomin's! that's where they are! However, I knew it all along. I've been told so; I've already been informed." (Mr. Sipiagin did not know this in the least, and no one had told him, but recollecting Solomin's visit and their midnight interview, he promptly threw out this bait, which caught Paklin at once.)

"Since you know that," he began and bit his tongue a second time … But it was already too late. A single glance at Sipiagin made him realise that he had been playing with him as a cat plays with a mouse.

"I must say, your excellency," the unfortunate Paklin stammered out; "I must say, that I really know nothing—"

"But I ask you no questions! Really! What do you take me and yourself for?" Sipiagin asked haughtily, and promptly withdrew into his ministerial heights.

And Paklin again felt himself a mean little ensnared creature. Until that moment he had kept the cigar in the corner of his mouth away from Sipiagin and puffed at it quietly, blowing the smoke to one side; now he took it out of his mouth and ceased smoking altogether.

"My God!" he groaned inwardly, while the perspiration streamed down his back more and more, "what have I done? I have betrayed

everything and everybody… I have been duped, been bought over by a good cigar!! I am a traitor! What shall I do now to help matters? 0h God!"

But there was nothing to be done. Sipiagin dozed off in a haughty, dignified, ministerial manner, enveloped in his stately cloak.

Chapter 35

THE governor of S. was one of those good-natured, happy-go-lucky, worldly generals who, endowed with wonderfully clean, snow-white bodies and souls to match, of good breeding and education, are turned out of a mill where they are never ground down to becoming the "shepherds of the people." Nevertheless they prove themselves capable of a tolerable amount of administrative ability— do little work, but are forever sighing after St. Petersburg and paying court to all the pretty women of the place. These are men who in some unaccountable way become useful to their province and manage to leave pleasant memories behind them. The governor had only just got out of bed, and was comfortably seated before his dressing-table in his night-shirt and silk dressing-gown, bathing his face and neck with eau-de-cologne after having removed a whole collection of charms and coins dangling from it, when he was informed of the arrival of Sipiagin and Kollomietzev upon some urgent business. He was very familiar with Sipiagin, having known him from childhood and constantly run across him in St. Petersburg drawing-rooms, and lately he had begun to ejaculate a respectful "Ah! " every time his name occurred to him—as if he saw in him a future statesman. Kollomietzev he did not know so well and respected less in consequence of various unpleasant complaints that had been made against him; however, he looked upon him as a man qui fera chemin in any case.

He ordered his guests to be shown into his study, where he soon joined them, as he was, in his silk dressing-gown, and not so much as excusing himself for receiving them in such an unofficial costume, shook hands with them heartily. Only Sipiagin and Kollomietzev appeared in the governor's study; Paklin remained in the drawing-room. On getting out of the carriage he had tried to slip away, muttering that he had some business at home, but Sipiagin had detained him with a polite firmness (Kollomietzev had rushed up to him and whispered in his ear: "Ne le lacher pas! Tonnerre de tonnerres!") and taken him in. He had not,

however, taken him to the study, but had asked him, with the same polite firmness, to wait in the drawing-room until he was wanted. Even here Paklin had hoped to escape, but a robust gendarme at Kollomietzev's instruction appeared in the doorway; so Paklin remained.

"I dare say you've guessed what has brought me to you, Voldemar," Sipiagin began.

"No, my dear, no, I can't," the amiable Epicurean replied, while a smile of welcome played about his rosy cheeks, showing a glimpse of shiny teeth, half hidden by his silky moustache.

"What? Don't you know about Markelov?"

"What do you mean? What Markelov?" the governor repeated with the same joyful expression on his face. He did not remember, in the first place, that the man who was arrested yesterday was called Markelov, and, in the second, he had quite forgotten that Sipiagin's wife had a brother of that name. "But why are you standing, Boris? Sit down. Would you like some tea?"

Sipiagin's mind was far from tea.

When at last he explained why they had both appeared, the governor uttered an exclamation of pain and struck himself on the forehead, while his face assumed a sympathetic expression.

"Dear me! what a misfortune! And he's here now—today… . You know we never keep that sort with us for more than one night at the outside, but the chief of police is out of town, so your brother-in-law has been detained. He is to be sent on tomorrow. Dear me! what a dreadful thing! What your wife must have gone through! What would you like me to do?"

"I would like to have an interview with him here, if it is not against the law."

"My dear boy! laws are not made for men like you. I do feel so sorry for you… . C'est affreux, tu sais!"

He gave a peculiar ring. An adjutant appeared.

My dear baron, do please make some arrangement there … " He told him what he wanted and the baron vanished. "Only think, mon cher ami, the peasants nearly killed him. They tied his hands behind him, flung him in a cart, and brought him here! And he's not in the least bit angry or indignant with them you know! He was so calm altogether that I was amazed! But you will see for yourself. C'est un fanatique tranquille."

"Ce sont les pires," Kollomietzev remarked sarcastically. The governor looked up at him from under his eyebrows. "By the way, I must have a word with you, Simion Petrovitch."

"Yes; what about?"

"I don't like things at all—"

"What things?"

"You know that peasant who owed you money and came here to complain—"

"Well? "

"He's hanged himself."

"When?"

"It's of no consequence when; but it's an ugly affair."

Kollomietzev merely shrugged his shoulders and moved away to the window with a graceful swing of the body. At this moment the adjutant brought in Markelov.

The governor had been right; he was unnaturally calm. Even his habitual moroseness had given place to an expression of weary indifference, which did not change when he caught sight of his brother-in-law. Only in the glance which he threw on the German adjutant, who was escorting him, there was a momentary flash of the old hatred he felt towards such people. His coat had been torn in several places and hurriedly stitched up with coarse thread; his forehead, eyebrows, and the bridge of his nose were covered with small scars caked with clotted blood. He had not washed, but had combed his hair.

"Sergai Mihailovitch!" Sipiagin began excitedly, taking a step or two towards him and extending his right hand, only so that he might touch him or stop him if he made a movement in advance, "Sergai Mihailovitch! I am not here to tell you of our amazement, our deep distress—you can have no doubt of that! You wanted to ruin yourself and have done so! But I've come to tell you … that … that … to give you the chance of hearing sound common-sense through the voice of honour and friendship. You can still mitigate your lot and, believe me, I will do all in my power to help you, as the honoured head of this province can bear witness!" At this point Sipiagin raised his voice. "A real penitence of your wrongs and a full confession without reserve which will be duly presented in the proper quarters—"

"Your excellency," Markelov exclaimed suddenly, turning towards the governor—the very sound of his voice was calm, though it was a little hoarse; "I thought that you wanted to see me in order to cross-examine me again, but if I have been brought here solely by Mr. Sipiagin's wish, then please order me to be taken back again. We cannot understand one another. All he says is so much Greek to me."

"Greek, eh!" Kollomietzev shrieked. "And to set peasants rioting, is that Greek too? Is that Greek too, eh?

"What have you here, your excellency? A landowner of the secret police? And how zealous he is!" Markelov remarked, a faint smile of pleasure playing about his pale lips.

Kollomietzev stamped and raged, but the governor stopped him.

"It serves you right, Simion Petrovitch. You shouldn't interfere in what is not your business."

"Not my business … not my business … It seems to me that it's the business of every nobleman—"

Markelov scanned Kollomietzev coldly and slowly, as if for the last time and then turned to Sipiagin.

"If you really want to know my views, my dear brother-in-law, here they are. I admit that the peasants had a right to arrest me and give me up if they disapproved of what I preached to them. They were free to do what they wanted. I came to them, not they to me. As for the government— if it does send me to Siberia, I'll go without grumbling, although I don't consider myself guilty. The government does its work, defends itself. Are you satisfied?"

Sipiagin wrung his hands in despair.

"Satisfied!! What a word! That's not the point, and it is not for us to judge the doings of the government. The question, my dear Sergai, is whether you feel" (Sipiagin had decided to touch the tender strings) "the utter unreasonableness, senselessness, of your undertaking and are prepared to repent; and whether I can answer for you at all, my dear Sergai."

Markelov frowned.

"I have said all I have to say and don't want to repeat it."

"But don't you repent? Don't you repent?"

"Oh, leave me alone with your repentence! You want to steal into my very soul? Leave that, at any rate, to me."

Sipiagin shrugged his shoulders.

"You were always like that; never would listen to common-sense. You have a splendid chance of getting out of this quietly, honourably…

"Quietly, honourably," Markelov repeated savagely. "We know those words. They are always flung at a man when he's wanted to do something mean! That is what these fine phrases are for!"

"We sympathise with you," Sipiagin continued reproachfully, "and you hate us."

"Fine sympathy! To Siberia and hard labour with us; that is your sympathy. Oh, let me alone! let me alone! for Heaven's sake!"

Markelov lowered his head.

He was agitated at heart, though externally calm. He was most of all tortured by the fact that he had been betrayed—and by whom? By Eremy of Goloplok! That same Eremy whom he had trusted so much! That Mendely the sulky had not followed him, had really not surprised him. Mendely was drunk and was consequently afraid. But Eremy! For Markelov, Eremy stood in some way as the personification of the whole Russian people, and Eremy had deceived him! Had he been mistaken about the thing he was striving for? Was Kisliakov a liar? And were Vassily Nikolaevitch's orders all stupid? And all the articles, books, works of socialists and thinkers, every letter of which had seemed to him invincible truth, were they all nonsense too? Was it really so? And the beautiful simile of the abcess awaiting the prick of the lancet—was that, too, nothing more than a phrase? "No! no! " he whispered to himself, and the colour spread faintly over his bronze-coloured face; "no! All these things are true, true … only I am to blame. I did not know how to do things, did not put things in the right way! I ought simply to have given orders, and if anyone had tried to hinder, or object—put a bullet through his head! there is nothing else to be done! He who is against us has no right to live. Don't they kill spies like dogs, worse than dogs?"

All the details of his capture rose up in Markelov's mind. First the silence, the leers, then the shrieks from the back of the crowd … someone coming up sideways as if bowing to him, then that sudden rush, when he was knocked down. His own cries of "What are you doing, my boys?" and their shouts, "A belt! A belt! tie him up! " Then the rattling of his bones … unspeakable rage … filth in his mouth, his nostrils … "Shove him in the cart! shove him in the cart!" someone roared with laughter. .

"I didn't go about it in the right way … " That was the thing that most tormented him. That he had fallen under the wheel was his personal misfortune and had nothing to do with the cause—it was possible to bear that … but Eremy! Eremy!!

While Markelov was standing with his head sunk on his breast, Sipiagin drew the governor aside and began talking to him in undertones. He flourished two fingers across his forehead, as though he would suggest that the unfortunate man was not quite right in his head, in order to arouse if not sympathy, at any rate indulgence towards the madman. The governor shrugged his shoulders, opened and shut his eyes, regretted his inability to do anything, but made some sort of promise in the end. "Tous les egards … certainement, tous les egards," the soft, pleasant words flowed through his scented moustache. "But you know the law, my boy!"

"Of course I do!" Sipiagin responded with a sort of submissive severity.

While they were talking in the corner, Kollomietzev could scarcely stand still in one spot. He walked up and down, hummed and hawed, showed every sign of impatience. At last he went up to Sipiagin, saying hastily, " Vous oublier l'autre!"

"Oh, yes!" Sipiagin exclaimed loudly. "Merci de me l'avoir rappele. Your excellency," he said, turning to the governor (he purposely addressed his friend Voldemar in this formal way, so as not to compromise the prestige of authority in Markelov's presence), "I must draw your attention to the fact that my brother-in-law's mad attempt has certain ramifications, and one of these branches, that is to say, one of the suspected persons, is to be found not very far from here, in this town. I've brought another with me," he added in a whisper, "he's in the drawing- room. Have him brought in here."

"What a man!" the governor thought with admiration, gazing respectfully at Sipiagin. He gave the order and a minute later Sila Paklin stood before him.

Paklin bowed very low to the governor as he came in, but catching sight of Markelov before he had time to raise himself, remained as he was, half bent down, fidgetting with his cap. Markelov looked at him vacantly, but could hardly have recognised him, as he withdrew into his own thoughts.

"Is this the branch?" the governor asked, pointing to Paklin with a long white finger adorned with a turquoise ring.

"Oh, no!" Sipiagin exclaimed with a slight smile. "However, who knows!" he added after a moment's thought. "Your excellency," he said aloud, "the gentleman before you is Mr. Paklin. He comes from St. Petersburg and is a close friend of a certain person who for a time held the position of tutor in my house and who ran away, taking with him a certain young girl who, I blush to say, is my niece.

"Ah! oui, oui," the governor mumbled, shaking his head, "I heard the story … The princess told me—"

Sipiagin raised his voice.

"That person is a certain Mr. Nejdanov, whom I strongly suspect of dangerous ideas and theories—"

"Un rouge a tous crins," Kollomietzev put in.

"Yes, dangerous ideas and theories," Sipiagin repeated more emphatically. "He must certainly know something about this propaganda. He is … in hiding, as I have been informed by Mr. Paklin, in the merchant Falyaeva's factory—"

At these words Markelov threw another glance at Paklin and gave a slow, indifferent smile.

"Excuse me, excuse me, your excellency," Paklin cried, "and you, Mr. Sipiagin, I never … never—"

"Did you say the merchant Falyaeva?" the governor asked, turning to Sipiagin and merely shaking his fingers in Paklin's direction, as much as to say," Gently, my good man, gently." "What is coming over our respectable, bearded merchants? Only yesterday one was arrested in connection with this affair. You may have heard of him—Golushkin, a very rich man. But he's harmless enough. He won't make revolutions; he's grovelling on his knees already."

"The merchant Falyaeva has nothing whatever to do with it," Sipiagin began; "I know nothing of his ideas; I was only talking of his factory where Mr. Nejdanov is to be found at this very moment, as Mr. Paklin says—"

"I said nothing of the kind!" Paklin cried; "you said it yourself!"

"Excuse me, Mr. Paklin," Sipiagin pronounced with the same relentless precision, "I admire that feeling of friendship which prompts you to deny it." ("A regular Guizot, upon my word!" the governor thought to himself.) "But take example by me. Do you suppose that the feeling of kinship is less strong in me than your feeling of friendship? But there is

another feeling, my dear sir, yet stronger still, which guides all our deeds and actions, and that is duty!"

"Le sentiment du devoir," Kollomietzev explained.

Markelov took both the speakers in at a glance.

"Your excellency!" he exclaimed, "I ask you a second time; please have me removed out of sight of these babblers."

But there the governor lost patience a little.

"Mr. Markelov!" he pronounced severely, "I would advise you, in your present position, to be a little more careful of your tongue, and to show a little more respect to your elders, especially when they give expression to such patriotic sentiments as those you have just heard from the lips of your beau-frere! I shall be delighted, my dear Boris," he added, turning to Sipiagin, "to tell the minister of your noble action. But with whom is this Nejdanov staying at the factory?"

Sipiagin frowned.

"With a certain Mr. Solomin, the chief engineer there, Mr. Paklin says."

It seemed to afford Sipiagin some peculiar pleasure in tormenting poor Sila. He made him pay dearly for the cigar he had given him and the playful familiarity of his behaviour.

"This Solomin," Kollomietzev put in, "is an out-and-out radical and republican. It would be a good thing if your excellency were to turn your attention to him too."

"Do you know these gentlemen … Solomin, and what's his name … Nejdanov?" the governor asked Markelov, somewhat authoritatively.

Markelov distended his nostrils malignantly.

"Do you know Confucius and Titus Livius, your excellency?"

The governor turned away.

"Il n'y a pas moyen de causer avec cette homme," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "Baron, come here, please."

The adjutant went up to him quickly and Paklin seized the opportunity of limping over to Sipiagin.

"What are you doing?" he asked in a whisper. "Why do you want to ruin your niece? Why, she's with him, with Nejdanov!"

"I am not ruining any one, my dear sir," Sipiagin said loudly, "I am only doing what my conscience bids me do, and—"

"And what your wife, my sister, bids you do; you dare not stand up against her!" Markelov exclaimed just as loudly.

Sipiagin took no notice of the remark; it was too much beneath him!

"Listen," Paklin continued, trembling all over with agitation, or may be from timidity; there was a malignant light in his eyes and the tears were nearly choking him—tears of pity for them and rage at himself; "listen, I told you she was married—it wasn't true, I lied! but they must get married—and if you prevent it, if the police get there—there will be a stain on your conscience which you'll never be able to wipe out—and you—"

"If what you have just told me be true," Sipiagin interrupted him still more loudly, "then it can only hasten the measures which I think necessary to take in this matter; and as for the purity of my conscience, I beg you not to trouble about that, my dear sir.

"It's been polished," Markelov put in again; "there is a coat of St. Petersburg varnish upon it; no amount of washing will make it come clean. You may whisper as much as you like, Mr. Paklin, but you won't get anything out of it!

At this point the governor considered it necessary to interfere.

"I think that you have said enough, gentlemen," he began, "and I'll ask you, my dear baron, to take Mr. Markelov away. N'est ce pas, Boris, you don't want him any further—"

Sipiagin made a gesture with his hands.

"I said everything I could think of!"

"Very well, baron!"

The adjutant came up to Markelov, clinked his spurs, made a horizontal movement of the hand, as if to request Markelov to make a move; the latter turned and walked out. Paklin, only in imagination it is true, but with bitter sympathy and pity, shook him by the hand.

"We'll send some of our men to the factory," the governor continued; "but you know, Boris, I thought this gentleman" (he moved his chin in Paklin's direction)" told you something about your niece … I understood that she was there at the factory. Then how…

"It's impossible to arrest her in any case," Sipiagin remarked thoughtfully; "perhaps she will think better of it and return. I'll write her a note, if I may."

"Do please. You may be quite sure … nous offrerons le quidam … mais nous sommes galants avec les dames et avec celle-la donc!"

"But you've made no arrangements about this Solomin," Kollomietzev exclaimed plaintively. He had been on the alert all the while, trying to catch what the governor and Sipiagin were saying. "I assure you he's the principal ringleader! I have a wonderful instinct about these things!"

"Pas trop de zele, my dear Simion Petrovitch," the governor remarked with a smile. "You remember Talleyrand! If it is really as you say the fellow won't escape us. You had better think of your—" the governor put his hand to his throat significantly. "By the way," he said, turning to Sipiagin, "et ce gaillard-la" (he moved his chin in Paklin's direction). "Qu'enferons nous? He does not appear very dangerous."

"Let him go," Sipiagin said in an undertone, and added in German, "Lass' den Lumpen laufen!"

He imagined for some reason that he was quoting from Goethe's Gotz von Berlichingen.

"You can go, sir!" the governor said aloud. "We do not require you any longer. Good day."

Paklin bowed to the company in general and went out into the street completely crushed and humiliated. Heavens! this contempt had utterly broken him.

"Good God! What am I? A coward, a traitor?" he thought, in unutterable despair. "Oh, no, no! I am an honest man, gentlemen! I have still some manhood left!"

But who was this familiar figure sitting on the governor's step and looking at him with a dejected, reproachful glance? It was Markelov's old servant. He had evidently come to town for his master, and would not for a moment leave the door of his prison. But why did he look so reproachfully at Paklin? He had not betrayed Markelov!

"And why did I go poking my nose into things that did not concern me? Why could I not sit quietly at home? And now it will be said and written that Paklin betrayed them— betrayed his friends to the enemy!" He recalled the look Markelov had given him and his last words, "Whisper as much as you like, Mr. Paklin, but you won't get anything out of it!" and then these sad, aged, dejected eyes! he thought in desperation. And as it says in the scriptures, he "wept bitterly" as he turned his steps towards the oasis, to Fomishka and Fimishka and Snandulia.

Chapter 36

WHEN Mariana came out of her room that morning she noticed Nejdanov sitting on the couch fully dressed. His head was resting against one arm, while the other lay weak and helpless on his knee. She went up to him.

"Goodmorning, Alexai. Why, you haven't undressed? Haven't you slept? How pale you are!"

His heavy eyelids rose slowly.

"No, I haven't."

"Aren't you well, or is it the after-effects of yesterday?

Nejdanov shook his head.

"I couldn't sleep after Solomin went into your room."

"When?"

Last night."

"Alexai! are you jealous? A new idea! What a time to be jealous in! Why, he was only with me a quarter of an hour. We talked about his cousin, the priest, and discussed arrangements for our marriage."

"I know that he was only with you a short time. I saw him come out. And I'm not jealous, oh no! But still I couldn't fall asleep after that."

"But why?"

Nejdanov was silent.

"I kept thinking … thinking… thinking!"

"Of what?

"Oh, of you … of him … and of myself."

"And what came of all your thinking?"

"Shall I tell you?"

Yes, tell me."

"It seemed to me that I stood in your way—in his … and in my own."

"Mine? His? It's easy to see what you mean by that, though you declare you're not jealous, but your own?"

"Mariana, there are two men in me and one doesn't let the other live. So I thought it might be better if both ceased to live."

"Please don't, Alexai. Why do you want to torment yourself and me? We ought to be considering ways and means of getting away. They won't leave us in peace you know."

Nejdanov took her hand caressingly.

"Sit down beside me, Mariana, and let us talk things over like comrades while there is still time. Give me your hand. It would be a good thing for us to have an explanation, though they say that all explanations only lead to further muddle. But you are kind and intelligent and are sure to understand, even the things that I am unable to express. Come, sit down."

Nejdanov's voice was soft, and a peculiarly affectionate tenderness shone in his eyes as he looked entreatingly at Mariana.

She sat down beside him readily and took his hand.

"Thanks, dearest. I won't keep you long. I thought out all the things I wanted to say to you last night. Don't think I was too much upset by yesterday's occurrence. I was no doubt extremely ridiculous and rather disgusting, but I know you didn't think anything bad of me—you know me. I am not telling the truth exactly when I say that I wasn't upset—I was horribly upset, not because I was brought home drunk, but because I was convinced of my utter inefficiency. Not because I could not drink like a real Russian— but in everything! everything! Mariana, I must tell you that I no longer believe in the cause that united us and on the strength of which we ran away together. To tell the truth, I had already lost faith when your enthusiasm set me on fire again. I don't believe in it! I can't believe in it!"

He put his disengaged hand over his eyes and ceased for awhile. Mariana did not utter a single word and sat looking downwards. She felt that he had told her nothing new.

"I always thought," Nejdanov continued, taking his hand away from his eyes, but not looking at Mariana again, "that I believed in the cause itself, but had no faith in myself, in my own strength, my own capacities. I used to think that my abilities did not come up to my convictions … But you can't separate these things. And what's the use of deceiving oneself?

No— I don't believe in the cause itself. And you, Mariana, do you believe in it?"

Mariana sat up straight and raised her head.

"Yes, I do, Alexai. I believe in it with all the strength of my soul, and will devote my whole life to it, to the last breath!"

Nejdanov turned towards her and looked at her enviously, with a tender light in his eyes.

"I knew you would answer like that. So you see there is nothing for us to do together; you have severed our tie with one blow."

Mariana was silent.

"Take Solomin, for instance," Nejdanov began again, "though he does not believe—"

"What do you mean?"

"It's quite true. He does not believe … but that is not necessary for him; he is moving steadily onwards. A man walking along a road in a town does not question the existence of the town— he just goes his way. That is Solomin. That is all that's needed. But I … I can't go ahead, don't want to turn back, and am sick of staying where I am. How dare I ask anyone to be my companion? You know the old proverb, 'With two people to carry the pole, the burden will be easier.' But if you let go your end- - what becomes of the other?"

"Alexai," Mariana began irresolutely, "I think you exaggerate. Do we not love each other?"

Nejdanov gave a deep sigh.

"Mariana … I bow down before you… you pity me, and each of us has implicit faith in the other's honesty— that is our position. But there is no love between us."

"Stop, Alexai! what are you saying? The police may come for us today… we must go away together and not part—"

"And get Father Zosim to marry us at Solomin's suggestion. I know that you merely look upon our marriage as a kind of passport— a means of avoiding any difficulties with the police … but still it will bind us to some extent; necessitate our living together and all that. Besides it always presupposes a desire to live together."

"What do you mean, Alexai? You don't intend staying here?"

Nejdanov said hesitatingly. The word "yes" nearly escaped his lips, but he recollected himself in time.

"Then you are going to a different place— not where I am going?"

Nejdanov pressed her hand which still lay in his own.

"It would indeed be vile to leave you without a supporter, without a protector, but I won't do that, as bad as I may be. You shall have a protector— rest assured."

Mariana bent down towards him and, putting her face close against his, looked anxiously into his eyes, as though trying to penetrate to his very soul.

"What is the matter, Alexai? What have you on your mind? Tell me … you frighten me. Your words are so strange and enigmatical … And your face! I have never seen your face like that!"

Nejdanov put her from him gently and kissed her hand tenderly. This time she made no resistance and did not laugh, but sat still looking at him anxiously.

"Don't be alarmed, dear. There is nothing strange in it. They say Markelov was beaten by the peasants; he felt their blows— they crushed his ribs. They did not beat me, they even drank with me— drank my health— but they crushed my soul more completely than they did Markelov's ribs. I was born out of joint, wanted to set myself right, and have made matters worse. That is what you notice in my face."

"Alexai," Mariana said slowly, "it would be very wrong of you not to be frank with me."

He clenched his hands.

"Mariana, my whole being is laid bare before you, and whatever I might do, I tell you beforehand, nothing will really surprise you; nothing whatever!"

Mariana wanted to ask him what he meant, but at that moment Solomin entered the room.

His movements were sharper and more rapid than usual. His eyes were half closed, his lips compressed, the whole of his face wore a drier, harder, somewhat rougher expression.

"My dear friends," he began, "I must ask you not to waste time, but prepare yourselves as soon as possible. You must be ready in an hour. You have to go through the marriage ceremony. There is no news of Paklin. His horses were detained for a time at Arjanov and then sent back. He has been kept there. They've no doubt brought him to town by this time. I don't think he would betray us, but he might let things out

unwittingly. Besides, they might have guessed from the horses. My cousin has been informed of your coming. Pavel will go with you. He will be a witness."

"And you … and you?" Nejdanov asked. "Aren't you going? I see you're dressed for the road," he added, indicating Solomin's high boots with his eyes.

"Oh, I only put them on … because it's rather muddy outside."

"But you won't be held responsible for us, will you?"

"I hardly think so … in any case … that's my affair. So you'll be ready in an hour. Mariana, I believe Tatiana wants to see you. She has something prepared for you."

"Oh, yes! I wanted to see her too … " Mariana turned to the door.

A peculiar expression of fear, despair, spread itself over Nejdanov's face.

"Mariana, you're not going?" he asked in a frightened tone of voice.

She stood still.

"I'll be back in half an hour. It won't take me long to pack."

"Come here, close to me, Mariana."

"Certainly, but what for? "

"I wanted to have one more look at you." He looked at her intently. Goodbye, goodbye, Mariana!"

She seemed bewildered.

"Why … what nonsense I'm talking! You'll be back in half an hour, won't you, eh?"

Of course—"

"Never mind; forgive me, dear. My brain is in a whirl from lack of sleep. I must begin … packing, too."

Mariana went out of the room and Solomin was about to follow her when Nejdanov stopped him.

"Solomin!"

"What is it? "

"Give me your hand. I must thank you for your kindness and hospitality."

Solomin smiled.

"What an idea!" He extended his hand.

"There's another thing I wished to say," Nejdanov continued. "Supposing anything were to happen to me, may I hope that you won't abandon Mariana?"

"Your future wife?

"Yes … Mariana!"

"I don't think anything is likely to happen to you, but you may set your mind at rest. Mariana is just as dear to me as she is to you."

"Oh, I knew it … knew it, knew it! I'm so glad! thanks. So in an hour?"

"In an hour."

"I shall be ready. Goodbye, my friend!"

Solomin went out and caught Mariana up on the staircase. He had intended saying something to her about Nejdanov, but refrained from doing so. And Mariana guessed that he wished to say something about him and that he could not. She, too, was silent.

Chapter 37

DIRECTLY Solomin had gone, Nejdanov jumped up from the couch, walked up and down the room several times, then stood still in the middle in a sort of stony indecision. Suddenly he threw off his "masquerade" costume, kicked it into a corner of the room, and put on his own clothes. He then went up to the little three- legged table, pulled out of a drawer two sealed letters and some other object which he thrust into his pocket; the letters he left on the table. Then he crouched down before the stove and opened the little door. A whole heap of ashes lay inside. This was all that remained of Nejdanov's papers, of his sacred book of verses … He had burned them all in the night. Leaning against one side of the stove was Mariana's portrait that Markelov had given him. He had evidently not had the heart to burn that too! He took it out carefully and put in on the table beside the two letters.

Then, with a quick resolute movement, he put on his cap and walked towards the door. But suddenly he stopped, turned back, and went into Mariana's room. There, he stood still for a moment, gazed round, then approaching her narrow little bed, bent down and with one stifled sob pressed his lips to the foot of the bed. He then jumped up, thrust his cap over his forehead, and rushed out. Without meeting anyone in the corridor, on the stairs, or down below, he darted out into the garden. It was a grey day, with a low-hanging sky and a damp breeze that blew in waves over the tops of the grass and made the trees rustle. A whiff of coal, tar, and tallow was borne along from the yard, but the noise and rattling in the factory was fainter than usual at that time of day. Nejdanov looked round sharply to see if anyone was about and made straight for the old apple tree that had first attracted his attention when he had looked out of the little window of his room on the day of his arrival. The whole of its trunk was evergrown with dry moss, its bare, rugged branches, sparsely covered with reddish leaves, rose crookedly, like some old arms held up in supplication. Nejdanov stepped firmly on to the dark soil beneath the tree and pulled out the object he had taken

from the table drawer. He looked up intently at the windows of the little house. "If somebody were to see me now, perhaps I wouldn't do it," he thought. But no human being was to be seen anywhere— everyone seemed dead or turned away from him, leaving him to the mercy of fate. Only the muffled hum and roar of the factory betrayed any signs of life; and overhead a fine, keen, chilly rain began falling.

Nejdanov gazed up through the crooked branches of the tree under which he was standing at the grey, cloudy sky looking down upon him so unfeelingly. He yawned and lay down. "There's nothing else to be done. I can't go back to St. Petersburg, to prison," he thought. A kind of pleasant heaviness spread all over his body … He threw away his cap, took up the revolver, and pulled the trigger.

Something struck him instantly, but with no very great violence … He was lying on his back trying to make out what had happened to him and how it was that he had just seen Tatiana. He tried to call her… but a peculiar numbness had taken possession of him and curious dark green spots were whirling about all over him— in his eyes, over his head, in his brain— and some frightfully heavy, dull weight seemed to press him to the earth forever.

Nejdanov did really get a glimpse of Tatiana. At the moment when he pulled the trigger she had looked out of a window and caught sight of him standing under the tree. She had hardly time to ask herself what he was doing there in the rain without a hat, when he rolled to the ground like a sheaf of corn. She did not hear the shot—it was very faint—but instantly felt that something was amiss and rushed out into the garden. She came up to Nejdanov, breathless.

"Alexai Dmitritch! What is the matter with you?"

But a darkness had already descended upon him. Tatiana bent over and noticed blood…

"Pavel!" she shouted at the top of her voice, "Pavel!"

A minute or two later, Mariana, Solomin, Pavel, and two workmen were in the garden. They lifted him instantly, carried him into the house, and laid him on the same couch on which he had passed his last night.

He lay on his back with half-closed eyes, his face blue all over. There was a rattling in his throat, and every now and again he gave a choking sob. Life had not yet left him. Mariana and Solomin were standing on either side of him, almost as pale as he was himself. They both felt crushed, stunned, especially Mariana- - but they were not surprised.

"How did we not foresee this? " they asked themselves, but it seemed to them that they had foreseen it all along. When he said to Mariana, "Whatever I do, I tell you beforehand, nothing will really surprise you," and when he had spoken of the two men in him that would not let each other live, had she not felt a kind of vague presentiment? Then why had she ignored it? Why was it she did not now dare to look at Solomin, as though he were her accomplice… as though he, too, were conscience-stricken? Why was it that her unutterable, despairing pity for Nejdanov was mixed with a feeling of horror, dread, and shame? Perhaps she could have saved him? Why are they both standing there, not daring to pronounce a word, hardly daring to breathe-waiting … for what? Oh, God!"

Solomin sent for a doctor, though there was no hope. Tatiana bathed Nejdanov's head with cold water and vinegar and laid a cold sponge on the small, dark wound, now free from blood. Suddenly the rattling in Nejdanov's throat ceased and he stirred a little.

"He is coming to himself," Solomin whispered. Mariana dropped down on her knees before him. Nejdanov glanced at her . . up until then his eyes had borne that fixed, far-away look of the dying.

"I am … still alive," he pronounced scarcely audible. "I couldn't even do this properly … I am detaining you."

"Aliosha! " Mariana sobbed out.

"It won't … be long… . Do you … remember … Mariana … my poem? … Surround me with flowers … But where … are the … flowers? Never mind … so long as you … are here… There in … my letter…

He suddenly shuddered.

"Ah! here it comes … Take … each other's hands … before me … quickly … take… "

Solomin seized Mariana's hand. Her head lay on the couch, face downwards, close to the wound. Solomin, dark as night, held himself severely erect.

"That's right … that's… "

Nejdanov broke out into sobs again—strange unusual sobs … His breast rose, his sides heaved.

He tried to lay his hand on their united ones, but it fell back dead.

"He is passing away," Tatiana whispered as she stood at the door, and began crossing herself.

His sobs grew briefer, fewer … He still searched around for Mariana with his eyes, but a menacing white film was spreading over them.

"That's right," were his last words.

He had breathed his last … and the clasped hands of Mariana and Solomin still lay upon his breast.

The following are the contents of the two letters he had left. One consisting only of a few lines, was addressed to Silin:

"Goodbye, my dear friend, goodbye! When this reaches you, I shall be no more. Don't ask why or wherefore, and don't grieve; be sure that I am better off now. Take up our immortal Pushkin and read over the description of the death of Lensky in 'Yevgenia Onegin.' Do you remember? The windows are white-washed. The mistress has gone—that's all. There is nothing more for me to say. Were I to say all I wanted to, it would take up too much time. But I could not leave this world without telling you, or you might have gone on thinking of me as living and I should have put a stain upon our friendship. Goodbye; live well.—Your friend, A. N."

The other letter, somewhat longer, was addressed to Solomin and Mariana. It began thus:

"MY DEAR CHILDREN" (immediately after these words there was a break, as if something had been scratched or smeared out, as if tears had fallen upon it),— "It may seem strange to you that I should address you in this way—I am almost a child myself and you, Solomin, are older than I am. But I am about to die—and standing as I do at the end of my life, I look upon myself as an old man. I have wronged you both, especially you, Mariana, by causing you so much grief and pain (I know you will grieve, Mariana) and giving you so much anxiety. But what could I do? I could think of no other way out. I could not simplify myself, so the only thing left for me to do was to blot myself out altogether.

Mariana, I would have been a burden to you and to myself. You are generous, you would have borne the burden gladly, as a new sacrifice, but I have no right to demand such a sacrifice of you- - you have a higher and better work before you. My children, let me unite you as it were from the grave. You will live happily together. Mariana, I know you will come to love Solomin—and he … he loved you from the moment he first saw you at the Sipiagins. It was no secret to me, although we ran away a few days later. Ah! that glorious morning! how exquisite and fresh and young it was! It comes back to me now as a token, a symbol of your life together—your life and his—and I by the merest chance happened to be in his place. But enough! I don't want to complain, I only want to justify

myself. Some very sorrowful moments are in store for you tomorrow. But what could I do? There was no other alternative. Goodbye, Mariana, my dear good girl! Goodbye, Solomin! I leave her in your charge. Be happy together; live for the sake of others. And you, Mariana, think of me only when you are happy. Think of me as a man who had also some good in him, but for whom it was better to die than to live. Did I really love you? I don't know, dear friend. But I do know that I never loved anyone more than you, and that it would have been more terrible for me to die had I not that feeling for you to carry away with me to the grave. Mariana, if you ever come across a Miss Mashurina— Solomin knows her, and by the way, I think you've met her too— tell her that I thought of her with gratitude just before the end. She will understand. But I must tear myself away at last. I looked out of the window just now and saw a lovely star amidst the swiftly moving clouds. No matter how quickly they chased one another, they could not hide it from view. That star reminded me of you, Mariana. At this moment you are asleep in the next room, unsuspecting … I went to your door, listened, and fancied I heard your pure, calm breathing … Goodbye! goodbye! goodbye, my children, my friends!—Yours, A.

"Dear me! how is it that in my final letter I made no mention of our great cause? I suppose lying is of no use when you're on the point of death. Forgive this postscript, Mariana … The falsehood lies in me, not in the thing in which you believe! One more word. You might have thought perhaps, Mariana, that I put an end to myself merely because I was afraid of going to prison, but believe me that is not true. There is nothing terrible about going to prison in itself, but being shut up there for a cause in which you have no faith is unthinkable. It was not fear of prison that drove me to this, Mariana. Goodbye! goodbye! my dear, pure girl."

Mariana and Solomin each read the letter in turn. She then put her own portrait and the two letters into her pocket and remained standing motionless.

"Let us go, Mariana; everything is ready. We must fulfil his wish," Solomin said to her.

Mariana drew near to Nejdanov and pressed her lips against his forehead which was already turning cold.

"Come," she said, turning to Solomin. They went out, hand in hand.

When the police arrived at the factory a few hours later, they found Nejdanov's corpse. Tatiana had laid out the body, put a white pillow under his head, crossed his arms, and even placed a bunch of flowers on a

little table beside him. Pavel, who had been given all the needful instructions, received the police officers with the greatest respect and as great a contempt, so that those worthies were not quite sure whether to thank or arrest him. He gave them all the details of the suicide, regaled them with Swiss cheese and Madeira, but as for the whereabouts of Vassily Fedotitch and the young lady, he knew nothing of that. He was most effusive in his assurances that Vassily Fedotitch was never away for long at a time on account of his work, that he was sure to be back either today or tomorrow, and that he would let them know as soon as he arrived. They might depend on him!

So the officers went away no wiser than they had come, leaving a guard in charge of the body and promising to send a coroner.

Chapter 38

Two days after these events, a cart drove up the courtyard of the worthy Father Zosim, containing a man and woman who are already known to the reader. The following day they were legally married. Soon afterwards they disappeared, and the good father never regretted what he had done. Solomin had left a letter in Pavel's charge, addressed to the proprietor of the factory, giving a full statement of the condition of the business (it turned out most flourishing) and asking for three months' leave. The letter was dated two days before Nejdanov's death, from which might be gathered that Solomin had considered it necessary even then to go away with him and Mariana and hide for a time. Nothing was revealed by the inquiry held over the suicide. The body was buried. Sipiagin gave up searching for his niece.

Nine months later Markelov was tried. At the trial he was just as calm as he had been at the governor's. He carried himself with dignity, but was rather depressed. His habitual hardness had toned down somewhat, not from any cowardice; a nobler element had been at work. He did not defend himself, did not regret what he had done, blamed no one, and mentioned no names. His emaciated face with the lustreless eyes retained but one expression: submission to his fate and firmness. His brief, direct, truthful answers aroused in his very judges a feeling akin to pity. Even the peasants who had seized him and were giving evidence against him shared this feeling and spoke of him as a good, simple- hearted gentleman. But his guilt could not possibly be passed over; he could not escape punishment, and he himself seemed to look upon it as his due. Of his few accomplices, Mashurina disappeared for a time. Ostrodumov was killed by a shopkeeper he was inciting to revolt, who had struck him an "awkward" blow. Golushkin, in consideration of his penitence (he was nearly frightened out of his wits), was let off lightly. Kisliakov was kept under arrest for about a month, after which he was released and even allowed to continue "galloping" from province of province. Nejdanov died, Solomin was under suspicion, but for lack of sufficient evidence

was left in peace. (He did not, however, avoid trial and appeared when wanted.) Mariana was not even mentioned; Paklin came off splendidly; indeed no notice was taken of him.

A year and a half had gone by—it was the winter of 1870. In St. Petersburg—the very same St. Petersburg where the chamberlain Sipiagin, now a privy councillor, was beginning to play such an important part; where his wife patronised the arts, gave musical evenings, and founded charitable cook-shops; where Kollomietzev was considered one of the most hopeful members of the ministerial department—a little man was limping along one of the streets of the Vassily island, attired in a shabby coat with a catskin collar. This was no other than our old friend Paklin. He had changed a great deal since we last saw him. On his temples a few strands of silvery hair peeped out from under his fur cap. A tall, stout woman, closely muffled in a dark cloth coat, was coming towards him on the pavement. Paklin looked at her indifferently and passed on. Suddenly he stopped, threw up his arms as though struck by something, turned back quickly, and overtaking her peeped under her hat.

"Mashurina!" he exclaimed in an undertone.

The lady looked at him haughtily and walked on without saying a word.

"Dear Mashurina, I recognised you at once," Paklin continued, hobbling along beside her; "don't be afraid, I won't give you away! I am so glad to see you! I'm Paklin, Sila Paklin, you know, Nejdanov's friend. Do come home with me. I live quite near here. Do come!"

"Io sono contessa Rocca di Santo Fiume!" the lady said softly, but in a wonderfully pure Russian accent.

"Contessa! nonsense! Do come in and let us talk about old times— "

"Where do you live? "the Italian countess asked suddenly in Russian. "I'm in a hurry."

"In this very street; in that grey three-storied house over there. It's so nice of you not to have snubbed me! Give me your hand, come on. Have you been here long? How do you come to be a countess? Have you married an Italian count?

Mashurina had not married an Italian count. She had been provided with a passport made out in the name of a certain Countess Rocca di Santo Fiume, who had died a short time ago, and had come quite calmly to Russia, though she did not know a single word of Italian and had the most typical of Russian faces.

Paklin brought her to his humble little lodging. His humpbacked sister who shared it with him came out to greet them from behind the partition dividing the kitchen from the passage.

"Here, Snapotchka," he said, "let me introduce you to a great friend of mine. We should like some tea as soon as you can get it."

Mashurina, who would on no account have come had not Paklin mentioned Nejdanov, bowed, then taking off her hat and passing her masculine hand through her closely cropped hair, sat down in silence. She had scarcely changed at all; even her dress was the same she had worn two years ago; only her eyes wore a fixed, sad expression, giving a pathetic look to her usually hard face. Snandulia went out for the samovar, while Paklin sat down opposite Mashurina and stroked her knee sympathetically. His head dropped on his breast, he could not speak from choking, and the tears glistened in his eyes. Mashurina sat erect and motionless, gazing severely to one side.

"Those were times!" Paklin began at last. "As I look at you everything comes back to me, the living and the dead. Even my little poll-parrots are no more … I don't think you knew them, by the way. They both died on the same day,as I always predicted they would. And Nejdanov… poor Nejdanov! I suppose you know—"

"Yes, I know," Mashurina interrupted him, still looking away.

"And do you know about Ostrodumov too?"

Mashurina merely nodded her head. She wanted him to go on talking about Nejdanov, but could not bring herself to ask him. He understood her, however.

"I was told that he mentioned you in the letter he left. Was it true?

"Yes," Mashurina replied after a pause.

"What a splendid chap he was! He didn't fall into the right rut somehow. He was about as fitted to be a revolutionist as I am! Do you know what he really was? The idealist of realism. Do you understand me?"

Mashurina flung him a rapid glance. She did not understand him and did not want to understand him. It seemed to her impertinent that he should compare himself to Nejdanov. "Let him brag!" she thought, though he was not bragging at all, but rather depreciating himself, according to his own ideas.

"Some fellow called Silin sought me out; Nejdanov, it seems, had left a letter for him too. Well, he wanted to know if Alexai had left any papers, but we hunted through all his things and found nothing. He must have

burned everything, even his poems. Did you know that he wrote verses? I'm sorry they were destroyed; there must have been some good things among them. They all vanished with him— became lost in the general whirl, dead and gone for ever. Nothing was left except the memories of his friends— until they, too, vanish in their turn!"

Paklin ceased.

"Do you remember the Sipiagins?" he began again; "those respectable, patronising, loathsome swells are now at the very height of power and glory." Mashurina, of course, did not remember the Sipiagins, but Paklin hated them so much that he could not keep from abusing them on every possible occasion. "They say there's such a high tone in their house! they're always talking about virtue! It's a bad sign, I think. Reminds me rather of an over-scented sick room. There must be some bad smell to conceal. Poor Alexai! It was they who ruined him!"

"And what is Solomin doing?" Mashurina asked. She had suddenly ceased wishing to hear Paklin talk about him.

"Solomin!" Paklin exclaimed. "He's a clever chap! turned out well too. He's left the old factory and taken all the best men with him. There was one fellow there called Pavel— could do anything; he's taken him along too. They say he has a small factory of his own now, somewhere near Perm, run on cooperative lines. He's all right! he'll stick to anything he undertakes. Got some grit in him! His strength lies in the fact that he doesn't attempt to cure all the social ills with one blow. What a rum set we are to be sure, we Russians! We sit down quietly and wait for something or someone to come along and cure us all at once; heal all our wounds, pull out all our diseases, like a bad tooth. But who or what is to work this magic spell, Darwinism, the land, the Archbishop Perepentiev, a foreign war, we don't know and don't care, but we must have our tooth pulled out for us! It's nothing but mere idleness, sluggishness, want of thinking. Solomin, on the other hand, is different; he doesn't go in for pulling teeth- - he knows what he's about!"

Mashurina gave an impatient wave of the hand, as though she wished to dismiss the subject.

"And that girl," she began, "I forget her name … the one who ran away with Nejdanov— what became of her?"

"Mariana? She's Solomin's wife now. They married over a year ago. It was merely for the sake of formality at first, but now they say she really is his wife."

Mashurina gave another impatient gesture. There was a time when she was jealous of Mariana, but now she was indignant with her for having been false to Nejdanov's memory.

"I suppose they have a baby by now," she said in an offhanded tone.

"I really don't know. But where are you off to?" Paklin asked, seeing that she had taken up her hat. "Do stay a little longer; my sister will bring us some tea directly."

It was not so much that he wanted Mashurina to stay, as that he could not let an opportunity slip by of giving utterance to what had accumulated and was boiling over in his breast. Since his return to St. Petersburg he had seen very little of people, especially of the younger generation. The Nejdanov affair had scared him; he grew more cautious, avoided society, and the young generation on their side looked upon him with suspicion. Once someone had even called him a traitor to his face.

As he was not fond of associating with the elder generation, it sometimes fell to his lot to be silent for weeks. To his sister he could not speak out freely, not because he considered her too stupid to understand him— oh, no! he had the highest opinion of her intelligence— but as soon as he began letting off some of his pet fireworks she would look at him with those sad reproachful eyes of hers, making him feel quite ashamed. And really, how is a man to go through life without letting off just a few squibs every now and again? So life in St. Petersburg became insupportable to Paklin and he longed to remove to Moscow. Speculations of all sorts— ideas, fancies, and sarcasms— were stored up in him like water in a closed mill. The floodgates could not be opened and the water grew stagnant. With the appearance of Mashurina the gates opened wide, and all his pent- up ideas came pouring out with a rush. He talked about St. Petersburg, St. Petersburg life, the whole of Russia. No one was spared! Mashurina was very little interested in all this, but she did not contradict or interrupt, and that was all he wanted of her.

"Yes," he began, "a fine time we are living in, I can assure you! Society in a state of absolute stagnation; everyone bored to death! As for literature, it's been reduced to a complete vacuum swept clean! Take criticism for example. If a promising young critic has to say, 'It's natural for a hen to lay eggs,' it takes him at least twenty whole pages to expound this mighty truth, and even then he doesn't quite manage it! They're as puffed up as feather-beds, these fine gentlemen, as soft-soapy as can be, and are always in raptures over the merest commonplaces! As for science, ha, ha, ha! we too have our learned Kant! [The word kant in

Russian means a kind of braid or piping.] on the collars of our engineers! And it's no better in art! You go to a concert and listen to our national singer Agremantsky. Everyone is raving about him. But he has no more voice than a cat! Even Skoropikin, you know, our immortal Aristarchus, rings his praises. 'Here is something,' he declares, 'quite unlike Western art! ' Then he raves about our insignificant painters too! 'At one time, I bowed down before Europe and the Italians,' he says, 'but I've heard Rossini and seen Raphael and confess I was not at all impressed.' And our young men just go about repeating what he says and feel quite satisfied with themselves. And meanwhile the people are dying of hunger, crushed down by taxes. The only reform that has been accomplished is that the men have taken to wearing caps and the women have left off their head-dresses! And the poverty! the drunkenness! the usury!"

But at this point Mashurina yawned and Paklin saw that he must change the subject.

"You haven't told me yet," he said, turning to her," where you've been these two years; when you came back, what you've been doing with yourself, and how you managed to turn into an Italian countess—"

"There is no need for you to know all that," she put in. "It can hardly have any interest for you now. You see, you are no longer of our camp."

Paklin felt a pang and gave a forced laugh to hide his confusion.

"As you please," he said; "I know I'm regarded as out-of-date by the present generation, and really I can hardly count myself … of those ranks—" He did not finish the sentence. "Here comes Snapotchka with the tea. Take a cup with us and stay a little longer. Perhaps I may tell you something of interest to you."

Mashurina took a cup of tea and began sipping it with a lump of sugar in her mouth.

Paklin laughed heartily.

"It's a good thing the police are not here to see an Italian countess—"

"Rocca di Santo Fiume," Mashurina put in solemnly, sipping the hot tea.

"Contessa Rocca di Santo Fiume!" Paklin repeated after her; "and drinking her tea in the typical Russian way! That's rather suspicious, you know! The police would be on the alert in an instant."

"Some fellow in uniform bothered me when I was abroad," Mashurina remarked. "He kept on asking so many questions until I couldn't stand it any longer. 'Leave me alone, for heaven's sake!' I said to him at last."

"In Italian?

"Oh no, in Russian."

"And what did he do?"

"Went away, of course."

"Bravo!" Paklin exclaimed. "Well, countess, have another cup. There is just one other thing I wanted to say to you. It seemed to me that you expressed yourself rather contemptuously of Solomin. But I tell you that people like him are the real men! It's difficult to understand them at first, but, believe me, they're the real men. The future is in their hands. They are not heroes, not even 'heroes of labour' as some crank of an American, or Englishman, called them in a book he wrote for the edification of us heathens, but they are robust, strong, dull men of the people. They are exactly what we want just now. You have only to look at Solomin. A head as clear as the day and a body as strong as an ox. Isn't that a wonder in itself? Why, any man with us in Russia who has had any brains, or feelings, or a conscience, has always been a physical wreck. Solomin's heart aches just as ours does; he hates the same things that we hate, but his nerves are of iron and his body is under his full control. He's a splendid man, I tell you! Why, think of it! here is a man with ideals, and no nonsense about him; educated and from the people, simple, yet all there … What more do you want?

"It's of no consequence," Paklin continued, working himself up more and more, without noticing that Mashurina had long ago ceased listening to him and was looking away somewhere, "it's of no consequence that Russia is now full of all sorts of queer people, fanatics, officials, generals plain and decorated, Epicureans, imitators, all manner of cranks. I once knew a lady, a certain Havrona Prishtekov, who, one fine day, suddenly turned a legitimist and assured everybody that when she died they had only to open her body and the name of Henry V. would be found engraven on her heart! All these people do not count, my dear lady; our true salvation lies with the Solomins, the dull, plain, but wise Solomins! Remember that I say this to you in the winter of 1870, when Germany is preparing to crush France—"

"Silishka," Snandulia's soft voice was heard from behind Paklin, "I think in your speculations about the future you have quite forgotten our religion and its influence. And besides," she added hastily, " Miss Mashurina is not listening to you. You had much better offer her some more tea."

Paklin pulled himself up.

"Why, of course … do have some more tea."

But Mashurina fixed her dark eyes upon him and said pensively:

"You don't happen to have any letter of Nejdanov s … or his photograph?"

"I have a photograph and quite a good one too. I believe it's in the table drawer. I'll get it in a minute."

He began rummaging about in the drawer, while Snandulia went up to Mashurina and with a long, intent look full of sympathy, clasped her hand like a comrade.

"Here it is! " Paklin exclaimed and handed her the photograph.

Mashurina thrust it into her pocket quickly, scarcely glancing at it, and without a word of thanks, flushing bright red, she put on her hat and made for the door.

"Are you going?" Paklin asked. "Where do you live? You might tell me that at any rate."

"Wherever I happen to be."

"I understand. You don't want me to know. Tell me at least, are you still working under Vassily Nikolaevitch?"

"What does it matter to you? "Or someone else, perhaps Sidor Sidoritch?" Mashurina did not reply.

"Or is your director some anonymous person?" Mashurina had already stepped across the threshold. "Perhaps it is someone anonymous!"

She slammed the door.

Paklin stood for a long time motionless before this closed door.

"Anonymous Russia!" he said at last.

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De las notas de un agricultor

I

A la una de la tarde de un día de la primavera del 1868 un joven de veintisiete años, vestido de manera descuidada y pobre, subía la escalera oscura de una casa de cinco pisos en la calle de los Oficiales, en San Petersburgo. Golpeando pesadamente con las galochas gastadas, balanceando lentamente su cuerpo pesado, torpe, llegó finalmente al último rellano, se detuvo ante una estropeada puerta entreabierta y, sin tocar el timbre, entró en un pequeño pasillo oscuro.

-¿Está Nezhdánov? -preguntó con voz alta y ruda. -No. Pero yo sí; entre -respondió desde la sala de

al lado una voz, también bastante ruda, de mujer. -¿Es Mashúrina? -preguntó el recién llegado. -Sí, soy yo. Y usted, ¿es Ostrodúmov?

-Pimen Ostrodúmov -respondió él y, después de quitarse cuidadosamente las galochas y colgar en un clavo el abrigo gastado por el uso, entró en la habitación de donde venía la voz femenina.

Era un cuarto pequeño, desordenado, con las paredes pintadas de verde oscuro, mal iluminado por dos ventanas llenas de polvo. Todo el mobiliario consistía en una cama de hierro en un rincón, una mesa en el centro, algunas sillas y un estante hacinado de libros. En la mesa estaba sentada una mujer de unos treinta años, sin sombrero, con un vestido negro de lana. Fumaba un cigarillo. Al ver a Ostrodúmov le alargó en silencio su

mano grande y colorada. Él, también en silencio, la apretó y, dejándose caer sobre una silla, sacó del bolsillo un puro partido por la mitad. Mashúrina le dio lumbre, él empezó a fumar y, sin mediar palabra, y ni tan siquiera mirarse, ambos empezaron a lanzar bocanadas de humo azul hacia la atmósfera estancada de la habitación, ya bastante cargada.

Aunque sus rasgos no tuvieran ningún parecido, entre ambos fumadores había algo en común. En sus desaliñadas figuras, labios gruesos, dientes largos, así como en el considerable volumen de su nariz (Ostrodúmov estaba además picado de viruelas), se intuía honestidad, firmeza y perseverancia.

-¿No ha visto a Nezhdánov? -preguntó, por fin, Ostrodúmov.

-Sí. Volverá en seguida. Fue a recoger unos libros a la biblioteca.

Ostrodúmov escupió hacia un lado.

¿Por qué va siempre de un sitio a otro? Nunca consigo encontrarle.

Mashúrina cogió otro cigarillo.

-Se aburre -dijo ella y lo encendió cuidadosamente.

-¡Se aburre! -repitió Ostrodúmov en un tono de censura-. ¡Qué sensibilidad! ¡Cómo si no tuviéramos qué hacer! Sabe Dios si conseguiremos salirnos con la nuestra... ¡y él se aburre!

-¿Llegó alguna carta de Moscú? -preguntó Mashúrina, haciendo una pausa.

-Sí... hace tres días.

-¿La leyó?

Ostrodúmov sólo movió la cabeza.

¿Y qué? ¿Qué hay?

¿Qué? Que tenemos que ir allá pronto.

Mashúrina se quitó el cigarrillo de la boca.

-Pero ¿por qué? Dicen que por allá todo va bien.

-Sí. Pero hay uno que se volvió poco seguro y es preciso deshacemos de él. Pero no es sólo eso. Hay otras cosas. La llaman también a usted.

¿En la carta?

-En la carta.

Mashúrina sacudió su pelo pesado, cuidadosamente enroscado en un pequeño moño, haciéndolo caer hacia adelante cubriéndole la frente hasta las cejas.

-Bien -dijo-, si ya se decidió, no hay nada que discutir.

-Claro que no. Lo que pasa es que sin dinero no se puede hacer nada. Y ¿de dónde vamos nosotros a sacar dinero?

Mashúrina quedó pensativa.

-Nezhdánov debe de poder conseguirlo -dijo en voz baja.

-Por eso mismo he venido -observó Ostrodúmov. ¿Tiene la carta? -preguntó de golpe Mashúrina.

-¿Quiere leerla?

-Démela... o no, no es preciso. Podemos leerla cuando estemos todos... después.

-Yo digo la verdad -gruñó Ostrodúmov-, no lo dude.

Y ambos se callaron de nuevo y sólo nubes de humo, como antes, les salían de las bocas silenciosas, subiendo y curvándose delicadamente por encima de sus cabezas crespas.

Se oyó un ruido de galochas en el corredor.

-¡Aquí está! -susurró Mashúrina.

La puerta se abrió un poco y por la hendidura apareció una cabeza, pero no era la de Nezhdánov.

Era una cabeza redonda, con el pelo negro y crespo, una gran frente arrugada, ojos castaños muy vivos bajo unas cejas gruesas, una nariz remachada, como de pato, y una boca de color rosa, gruesa, guasona. Aquella cabeza miró, se agitó, sonrió -exhibiendo numerosos dientes pequeños y blancos- y entró juntamente con un cuerpo frágil, brazos cortos y piernas un poco curvas

y un poco cojas. Y en seguida que Mashúrina y Ostrodúmov vieron aquella cabeza, una expresión de desprecio y condescendencia les vino al rostro, como si pensaran: «¡Ah, es éste!», y no dijeron una sola palabra ni se movieron. Además, el recién llegado no sólo no se sintió vejado por aquella recepción sino que pareció haber quedado muy satisfecho.

-¿Qué quiere decir esto? -preguntó él con voz chillona-. ¿Un dueto? ¿Y por qué no un trío? ¿Dónde está el primer tenor?

-¿Se refiere a Nezhdánov, señor Paklin? -preguntó Ostrodúmov muy serio.

-Precisamente, señor Ostrodúmov, a él mismo. -Debe de estar al llegar, señor Paklin.

-Estoy muy contento de saberlo, señor Ostrodúmov.

El pequeño cojo se giró hacia Mashúrina, que estaba sentada frunciendo las cejas y seguía chupando ociosamente su cigarrillo.

¿Cómo está, mi querida... mi querida...? ¡Oh, qué fastidio! ¡Siempre olvido su nombre y el nombre de su padre!

Comentario [Librodot-1]: Normalmente los rusos usan el nombre propio *(imia)* y el nombre del padre con varios sufijos *(óchestvo)*. Al final viene el apellido *(familiia)* usado más raramente como forma de tratamiento.

Mashúrina se encogió de hombros.

-¡Y no necesita saberlo! Conoce mi apellido. ¿Para qué necesita más? ¿Y por qué siempre está preguntando cómo estoy? ¿No ve que estoy viva?

-Claro, ¡es lógico! -exclamó Paklin dilatando las narices y torciendo las cejas-. ¡Si no estuviera viva, este su humilde servidor no tendría la satisfacción de verla aquí y de estar hablando con usted! Mi curiosidad es debida a una mala y anticuada costumbre. Pero en cuanto a su nombre... Es muy poco cordial tratarla simplemente por Mashúrina. Ya sé que sólo firma sus cartas con el nombre de Bonaparte. ¡Perdón, Mashúrina! De todas maneras, en conversación...

-¿Y quién le pide que converse conmigo?

Paklin sonrió nerviosamente, como atragantado.

-Bien, disculpe, mi querida. Déme su mano, no se irrite. Ya sé que sus intenciones son buenas... y las mías también... ¿Entonces?

Paklin le alargó la mano. Mashúrina le miró con antipatía... pero le alargó la suya.

-Si quiere realmente saber mi nombre -dijo ella con la misma expresión severa-, me llamo Fielka.

-Y yo Pimen -añadió Ostrodúmov con su voz de bajo.

-¡Ah, esto es muy... muy edificante! Pero, de todas formas, decidme, ¡oh Fielka!, y vos, ¡oh Pimen!, decidme por que razón sois ambos tan poco cordiales, tan persistentemente antipáticos conmigo, mientras yo...

-Mashúrina piensa -le interrumpió Ostrodúmov-, y no es la única, que no se puede tener confianza en usted, porque se ríe siempre de todo.

Paklin se giró súbitamente sobre los talones.

-Es este el error que las personas cometen habitualmente cuando me juzgan, mi querido Pimen. En primer lugar, yo no me río siempre; en segundo lugar eso no molesta a nadie, y se puede confiar en mí, que ya he sido honrado con vuestra confianza en más de una ocasión. Yo soy un hombre honesto, ¡mi querido Pimen!

Ostrodúmov murmuró algo entre dientes, pero Paklin sacudió la cabeza y repitió, ya sin sonreír:

-¡No, no me estoy riendo siempre! ¡No soy de manera alguna un hombre alegre! ¡Basta con mirarme!

Ostrodúmov le miró. Realmente, cuando Paklin no reía, cuando estaba callado, su rostro tenía una expresión casi desesperada, casi aterrorizada; se volvía alegre y hasta sarcástico sólo cuando abría la boca. Pero Ostrodúmov no dijo nada.

Paklin se dirigió de nuevo a Mashúrina:

-Bien, y sus estudios, ¿cómo van? ¿Ha tenido éxito con su verdadero arte filantrópico? ¿Es muy difícil ayudar a un ciudadano inexperto en sus primeros pasos en este mundo de Dios?

-Nada. No hay nada más fácil si no es más grande que usted -respondió Mashúrina, que había acabado de aprobar su examen para comadrona, con una sonrisa de satisfacción.

Hacía cerca de un año había dejado a su familia, de aristócratas pobres, al sur de Rusia, y había venido a San Petersburgo con doce rublos en el bolsillo; entró en una escuela de comadronas y trabajó mucho para obtener el diploma. Era soltera... y muy casta. «¡No sorprende!», podría decir un escéptico recordando lo que dijimos de su figura. Pero es sorprendente por ser tan raro, nos permitimos declarar.

Oyendo esta respuesta, Paklin sonrió de nuevo.

-¡Bravo, mi querida! -exclamó-. ¡Me doy por vencido! Pero ¿qué puedo hacer si soy tan chaparro? No obstante estoy sorprendido: ¿a dónde habrá ido nuestro anfitrión?

Paklin cambió intencionalmente el tema de la conversación. No podía reconciliarse con su pequeña estatura, con toda su figura poco agradable. Lo sentía aún más porque las mujeres le gustaban terriblemente. Lo daría todo para poder agradarles. La conciencia de su miserable apariencia le dolía más que su bajo origen y que su poco envidiable posición en la sociedad. El padre de Paklin era un simple pequeño burgués que, a través de todo tipo de medios deshonestos, había llegado a la posición de consejero titular. Administraba propiedades, fincas y había hecho dinero de las maneras más impensadas; pero al final de su vida empezó a beber demasiado y no dejó nada cuando murió. El joven Paklin (se llamaba Sila... Sila Samsonich, y siempre había considerado este nombre una ironía) estudió en una escuela comercial, donde aprendió correctamente el alemán. Después de muchas y duras dificultades, entró finalmente en un despacho privado, con un sueldo de mil quinientos rublos de plata al año. Con ese dinero tenían que sustentarse él, una tía enferma y una hermana que era jorobada. En el momento de nuestra historia, acababa de cumplir veintiocho años. Paklin conocía a muchos estudiantes y a otros jóvenes, que le apreciaban a causa de su espíritu cínico, de sus discursos divertidamente biliosos y llenos de seguridad, de su cultura tendenciosa pero genuina, sin pedantería. Pero a veces le atacaban. En cierta ocasión, llegó tarde a una reunión política... empezó en seguida a pedir disculpas apresuradamente... «El pobre Paklin tiene miedo», entonó burlonamente alguien desde un rincón. Y todos rieron. Paklin acabó por reír con ellos, aunque aquello fuera como una puñalada en su corazón. «¡Dijo la verdad, el bandido!», pensó. Había conocido a Nezhdánov en un pequeño restaurante griego, donde cenaba a menudo y donde ventilaba libre y audazmente sus opiniones. Aseguraba que la principal causa de su actitud democrática era la mala cocina griega que le destruía el hígado.

Comentario [Librodot-2]: En el cuadro del funcionariado civil ruso era equivalente al grado de capitán.

Comentario [Librodot-3]: «Sila quiere decir «fuerza». Es un nombre extremamente sarcástico: Fuerza hijo de Sansón.

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-¿Dónde habrá ido nuestro anfitrión? -repitió Paklin-. Ya me he dado cuenta de que desde hace algún tiempo parece que está fuera de sí. Al menos que no se enamore, ¡Dios nos ayude!

Mashúrina frunció las cejas.

-Fue a la biblioteca a recoger unos libros. En cuanto a enamorarse, no tiene ni tiempo ni de quien.

«¿Y de usted?», casi se escapó de los labios de Paklin.

-Quería verle -dijo en voz alta-, porque necesito discutir con él un asunto muy importante.

¿Qué asunto? -interfirió Ostrodúmov-. ¿De nuestras cosas?

-Quizá vuestras... o sea, nuestras, comunes. Ostrodúmov canturreó. No le creía, pero pensó: «Pero ¡quién sabe! ¡Tiene siempre tantos trucos!

Ya viene, por fin -dijo de repente Mashúrina, y sus ojos pequeños y poco atractivos, fijos en la puerta, se iluminaron como encendidos por una luz íntima que los hizo cariñosos y tiernos...

La puerta se abrió y esta vez, con una gorra en la cabeza y un montón de libros bajo el brazo, entró un muchacho joven, de unos veintitrés años. Era Nezhdánov.

II

CUANDO vio a los visitantes que estaban en su habitación, se detuvo en el umbral, pasó los ojos por ellos, se quitó la gorra, dejó caer los libros en el suelo y, caminando hasta el fondo, se sentó al borde de la cama. Su bello rostro blanco, que parecía aún más pálido en contraste con el color rojo oscuro de su pelo rizado, asumió una expresión de aburrimiento y desagrado.

Mashúrina se volvió ligeramente y se mordió el labio. Ostrodúmov murmuró:

-¡Por fin!

Paklin fue el primero que se acercó a Nezhdánov.

¿Qué tienes tú, Alexéi Dmítrievich, Hamlet ruso? ¿Quién te tortura? ¿O estás simplemente deprimido sin razón?

-Calla, por favor, Mefistófeles ruso -respondió Nezhdánov, irritado-. No estoy dispuesto a esgrimir contigo gracejos triviales.

Paklin sonrió.

-No te expresas correctamente: si son gracejos no pueden ser triviales, si son triviales no son gracejos.

-De acuerdo, de acuerdo... Ya sabemos que eres muy inteligente.

-Y que tú estás nervioso -observó Paklin, vacilando-. ¿O habrá realmente pasado algo?

-No pasó nada especial. La única cosa que pasa es que no se puede poner la nariz fuera de casa en esta odiosa ciudad sin dar con cualquier vulgaridad, estupidez, injusticia o imbecilidad. Ya no se puede vivir aquí.

-¿Es por eso que pusiste el anuncio buscando empleo incluso fuera de San Petersburgo? -preguntó de nuevo Ostrodúmov.

-¡Y me largaré de aquí con el mayor placer! ¡Si aparece algún chalado que me ofrezca un trabajo!

-Primero es necesario cumplir el deber *aquí* -dijo significativamente Mashúrina, sin dejar de mirar de lado.

¿Qué deber? -preguntó Nezhdánov, girándose bruscamente hacia ella. Mashúrina se mordió el labio.

-Que Ostrodúmov te lo diga.

Nezhdánov se giró hacia él. Pero éste sólo canturreó y tosió:

-Espera.

-No, nada de bromas, en serio -se metió Paklin-. ¿Has oído alguna noticia desagradable?

Nezhdánov saltó de la cama como si lo empujaran.

-¿Quieres algo desagradable? -gritó de repente con voz cantante-. ¡Media Rusia se muere de hambre! ¡La «Gaceta de Moscú» está triunfante! Quieren introducir los estudios clásicos, las cajas de ayuda estudiantiles han sido suprimidas, hay espías por todas partes, opresión, traiciones, mentiras y falsedades... no puedes dar un paso en ningún sitio... y aún le parece poco, quiere más cosas desagradables, cree que me estoy divirtiendo... Basánov fue arrestado -añadió, bajando un poco la voz-. Me lo dijeron en la biblioteca.

Ostrodúmov y Mashúrina levantaron la cabeza a la par.

-Mi querido amigo Alexéi Dmítrievich -empezó Paklin-, estás preocupado... y con razón. Pero ¿olvidas en qué tiempos y en qué país vivimos? Entre nosotros, el mismo hombre que se ahoga tiene que inventar la paja a la que tiene que agarrarse. ¿Por qué demonios tenemos que ponernos sentimentales? Es necesario, hermanos, enfrentarnos al diablo y no excitarnos como niños...

-¡Ah, por favor, por favor! -interrumpió desesperadamente Nezhdánov y hasta hizo una mueca como si le doliera algo-. Ya sabemos que tú eres un hombre enérgico y que nada te da miedo...

-¿Nada me da miedo? -replicó Paklin.

-¿Quién puede haber traicionado a Basánov? -prosiguió Nezhdánov-. ¡No lo entiendo!

-Un amigo, ya se sabe. Son muy buenos para eso, los amigos. ¡Hay que ser siempre desconfiado! A mí, una vez, un amigo... ¡y parecía un buen tipo; estaba preocupado por mí y por mi reputación! Un día, mira, llega y grita: «¡Vea las historias tan horribles que cuentan de usted! Aseguran que usted envenenó a su padre y que una vez, en una visita, se sentó de espaldas a la señora de la casa y estuvo toda la noche así. Y que ella incluso lloró por el insulto. ¡Vean bien que cosa más absurda, qué tontería! ¡Sólo un idiota podría creer algo así!» ¿Y qué? Un año después tuve una riña con ese mismo amigo... y me escribió en su carta de despedida: «¡Usted, que asesinó a su tío! ¡Usted, que no tuvo vergüenza de insultar a una señora digna sentándose de espaldas a ella!...» y así hasta el final. ¡Vean lo que son los amigos!

Ostrodúmov cambió una mirada con Mashúrina.

-¡Alexéi Dmítrievich! -exclamó él con su voz pesada de bajo. Quería evidentemente evitar una discusión inútil-. Llegó una carta de Moscú, de Vasili Nikoláievich.

Nezhdánov se estremeció ligeramente y bajó los ojos.

¿Qué quiere? -preguntó por fin.

-Nosotros... esto es, yo y ella... -Ostrodúmov indicó a Mashúrina con las cejas-, tenemos que ir allá. -¿Cómo? ¿También ella?

-También.

¿Y que problema hay?

-Ya se sabe... dinero.

Nezhdánov se levantó de la cama y caminó hasta la ventana.

¿Mucho?

-Cincuenta rublos... Menos no llega.

Nezhdánov quedó silencioso.

-En este momento no tengo -murmuró por fin, golpeando con los dedos en el cristal-, pero... puedo conseguirlos. Los conseguiré. ¿Tienes aquí la carta?

-¿La carta? Bien... claro... claro...

-¿Por qué motivo me lo ocultan todo? -gritó Paklin-. ¿No merezco vuestra confianza? Aunque no estuviera de acuerdo completamente... con lo que ustedes pretenden, ¿temen que yo pueda cambiar o revelarlo?

-Sin querer... ¡quizá! -dijo Ostrodúmov.

-¡Ni sin querer ni queriendo! Vean a la señorita Mashúrina mirándome y sonriendo... pero yo digo... -Yo no sonrío -cortó Mashúrina.

-Y yo digo -continuó Paklin-, que ustedes no tienen perspicacia, ¡no saben reconocer quiénes son sus verdaderos amigos! Un hombre ríe y piensan en seguida que no es una

Comentario [Librodot-4]: Se refiere al hambre de 1868, que asoló vastas regiones de Rusia.

Comentario [Librodot-5]: Se refiere al «Moskóvskii védomost'», publicación dirigida por el conocido conservador M.N. Katkov, y al cierre, en 1966, de dos revistas demócratas: «El contemporáneo» [«Sovremennik«] y «La palabra rusa» [«Rússkoe slovo»].

Comentario [Librodot-6]: Considerando las ciencias naturales un criadero de «nihilismo, los conservadores, particularmente M.N. Katkov y el profesor P.M. Leóntiev, intentaban cambiar el sistema de educación para que dominaran las asignaturas apartadas de la vida prática (lengua griega, latín).

Comentario [Librodot-7]: En 1857, por iniciativa de los redactores de la revista universitaria «Sbornik« [«Recull»], fue organizada una Caja de ayuda a los estudiantes, que tuvo un papel muy importante pues había entre ellos casos de extrema miseria. Del 31 de diciembre de 1857 a 1 de junio de 1859, la Caja distribuyó 9.000 rublos mientras durante el mismo período las becas y subvenciones oficiales sólo se elevaban a 7.160 rublos.

Comentario [Librodot-8]: Se refiere a la acción de la Tercera Sección de la Chancillería Imperial, que, entre 1826 y 1888, controlaba la gendarmería incluyendo una red de agentes secretos. Estas funciones sólo en 1880 pasaron al ministerio del interior.

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persona seria...

-¿Y no es así? -cortó de nuevo Mashúrina.

-Ustedes, por ejemplo -continuó Paklin con nueva energía, esta vez sin prestar atención a Mashúrina-, ustedes necesitan dinero... y Nezhdánov no lo tiene... Pues yo puedo conseguirlo.

Nezhdánov se volvió rápidamente hacia la ventana.

-No... no... No es necesario. Pediré un adelanto sobre mi mensualidad... Ahora recuerdo que ellos me deben dinero. Y tú, Ostrodúmov, muéstrame la carta.

Ostrodúmov primero se quedó quieto durante unos instantes, después miró alrededor, se levantó, curvó todo el cuerpo y, levantándose los pantalones, sacó de la caña de la bota un trozo de papel azul, por una razón cualquiera lo sopló y lo entregó a Nezhdánov.

Este cogió el papel, lo desdobló, lo leyó atentamente y lo pasó a Mashúrina, que se levantó, lo leyó también y lo devolvió a Nezhdánov, a pesar de que Paklin había también alargado la mano. Nezhdánov se encogió de hombros y pasó la carta secreta a Paklin. Este examinó el papel y, apretando los labios significativamente, lo depositó sobre la mesa con un aire solemne. Entonces Ostrodúmov lo cogió, encendió una cerilla grande, que echaba un fuerte olor a azufre, levantó el papel por encima de la cabeza, como mostrándolo a todos los presentes, lo acercó a la cerilla, sin preocuparse por sus dedos, y dejó las cenizas en la chimenea. Nadie profirió palabra ni se movió durante toda la operación. Todos los ojos estaban bajos. Ostrodúmov tenía un aire concentrado y vivo, el rostro de Nezhdánov parecía furioso, el de Paklin intenso, el de Mashúrina como si asistiera a. una ceremonia religiosa.

Así pasaron dos minutos... Seguidamente todos se sintieron un poco incómodos. Paklin fue el primero que tuvo necesidad de romper el silencio.

¿Qué? -empezó-. ¿Mi sacrificio en el altar de la patria es recibido o no? ¿Me es permitido traer si no los cincuenta, por lo menos veinticinco o treinta rublos para la causa común?

De repente Nezhdánov explotó. Parecía que hervía de fastidio..., que la solemne quema de la carta no había hecho disminuir y sólo esperaba una oportunidad para reventar.

-Ya te he dicho que no es necesario, no es necesario... ¡no es necesario! No lo permito ni lo acepto. Yo mismo conseguiré el dinero, lo conseguiré inmediatamente. ¡No necesito la ayuda de nadie!

-Bien, hermano -observó Paklin-, veo que a pesar de que eres un revolucionario, no eres demócrata.

-¿Por qué no dices directamente que soy un aristócrata?

-Claro que eres un aristócrata... hasta cierto punto.

Nezhdánov dejó escapar una sonrisa forzada.

¿Quieres aludir al hecho de que soy hijo ilegítimo? Te molestas en vano, querido amigo... No te necesito para no olvidarlo.

Paklin extendió los brazos afligido.

-Aliosha, por favor, ¿qué te ocurre? ¿Cómo puedes entender mis palabras de esa manera? Hoy no te reconozco -Nezhdánov hizo un gesto impaciente con la cabeza y con los hombros-. El arresto de Basánov te ha desorientado, pero él tenía tan poco cuidado...

-No ocultaba sus convicciones -observó Mashúrina con aire abatido-. ¡No nos corresponde juzgarle!

-Sí, pero también debía pensar en los otros, a quienes ahora puede comprometer.

¿Por qué? -exclamó Ostrodúmov-. Basánov es un hombre de gran carácter, no denunciará a nadie. ¿Y por qué debía ser cuidadoso? ¡No todos pueden ser cuidadosos, señor Paklin!

Paklin se sentía ofendido y quería discutir, pero Nezhdánov no le dejó.

-¡Señores! -gritó-, por favor ¡dejen la política durante un rato!

Siguió una pausa.

-Hoy encontré a Skoropijin -dijo, por fin, Paklin-, nuestro gran crítico y esteta y entusiasta. ¡Qué tipo tan insoportable! Está siempre hirviendo y resollando como una botella

Comentario [Librodot-9]: Diminutivo de Alexéi.

Comentario [Librodot-10]: Paklin alude al crítico musical y de arte de tendencia liberal V. V. Stásov (18241906), con quien Turguénev tuvo divergencias por cuestiones artísticas. Más tarde Stásov recordó: «He preguntado, sonriendo, a Turguénev: "Muchas personas me garantizan que Skoropijin soy yo. Es cierto, Iván Serguéievich?" Como respuesta, él sonrió también y dijo: "Sí, seguro, en parte es usted, pero también muchos otros...". (»Sévemii véstnik» [.El heraldo del norte»], 1888, núm. 10, pág. 160).

Librodot

de sopa de col agria podrida... El criado corre con ella, tapándola con el dedo en vez del tapón, con la respiración suspendida... la botella espumea y silba y después de echar toda la espuma... todo lo que queda en el fondo es un poco de materia aguada, asquerosa, que no sólo no apaga la sed a nadie, sino que llegaría para hacemos enfermar... ¡Es un individuo muy peligroso para los jóvenes!

La comparación de Paklin, tan verdadera y acertada, no provocó ninguna sonrisa. Sólo Ostrodúmov observó que los jóvenes que se interesaban por la estética no tenían nada de qué quejarse, aunque Skoropijin los desviara.

-Pero naturalmente -exclamó Paklin con calor (cuanta menos simpatía encontraba más se excitaba)-, esta cuestión no es política pero así mismo es importante. Según Skoropijin, todas las obras de arte antiguas no tienen ningún valor sólo por el simple hecho de que son viejas... De ese modo, el arte, el arte en general, es sólo moda, y no vale la pena hablar seriamente de arte. Si el arte no tiene nada de firme, de permanente... que se lo lleve el demonio. Mirad la ciencia, la matemática, por ejemplo, ¿reconocen a Euler, Laplace, Gauss como locos? Están dispuestos a aceptar su autoridad, pero en cuanto a Rafael o a Mozart... son chiflados. Y ¿por qué nos levantamos contra su autoridad? Las leyes del arte son más difíciles de definir que las de la ciencia... de acuerdo, pero existen... y quien no las ve es porque está ciego, tanto si cierra los ojos voluntaria como involuntariamente... ¡da igual!

Paklin se calló... y nadie dijo nada. Todos apretaban los labios como si les diera mucha pena. Sólo Ostrodúmov observó:

-De todas formas, no siento ninguna lástima por esos jóvenes que van tras Skoropijin.

«¡Ah, ustedes son imposibles!», pensó Paklin. «¡Vale más que me largue!»

Había ido a casa de Nezhdánov para pedir su opinión sobre la revista «Estrella Polar», pasada clandestinamente del extranjero («La campana» ya no existía), pero la conversación había seguido tal rumbo que sería mejor no plantearle la cuestión. Paklin ya había cogido el sombrero cuando, de golpe, sin ningún ruido previo, se oyó en el pasillo una voz admirablemente agradable de barítono, cuyo sonido sugería a alguien inusitadamente noble, educado, incluso fragante.

-¿Está el señor Nezhdánov?

Todos se miraron sorprendidos.

¿Está el señor Nezhdánov? -repitió la voz. -Sí -respondió finalmente Nezhdánov.

La puerta se abrió despacio y, quitándose lentamente el sombrero lustroso de su bella y elegante cabeza, entró en la habitación un hombre de unos cuarenta años, alto, fuerte y majestuoso. Llevaba una chaqueta de bella tela con un excelente cuello de castor, aunque ya estaba a punto de finalizar abril. Impresionó a todos -a Nezhdánov, a Paklin, incluso a Mashúrina... ¡incluso a Ostrodúmov!- por su porte elegante, simple y cortés. Todos se levantaron instintivamente a su entrada.

Comentario [Librodot-11]: «Poliárnaia zvezdá»: revista liberal rusa publicada en Londres de 1855 a 1862 y, a partir de 1869, en Ginebra, por Herzen y Ogarióv.

Comentario [Librodot-12]: «Kólokol»: revista liberal rusa publicada en Londres de 1857 a 1868, por los mismos editores de «Poliárnaia zvezdá».

III

AQUEL hombre tan elegante se dirigió a Nezhdánov y, con una sonrisa amable, dijo: -Tuve ya el placer de encontrarle e incluso de conversar con usted, señor Nezhdánov, anteayer, debe acordarse... en el teatro. -El visitante se detuvo, como si esperara; Nezhdánov bajó ligeramente la cabeza y se ruborizó-. ¡Sí!... y hoy he venido a verle a causa del anuncio que he leído en el periódico... Me gustaría conversar con usted, si a sus visitas no les importa...

Hizo una reverencia delicada con la cintura y, cogiendo una silla por el respaldo, la atrajo hacia sí, pero no se sentó -pues todos estaban de pie-, y sólo miró alrededor con sus ojos brillantes, aunque entreabiertos.

-Adiós, Alexéi Dmítrievich -dijo de golpe Mashúrina-, volveré más tarde.

-Y yo -añadió Ostrodúmov-. Yo también... después.

Sin la mínima atención hacia el visitante cuando pasó por su lado, Mashúrina alargó la mano a Nezhdánov, la apretó con fuerza y salió sin mirar a nadie. Ostrodúmov la siguió, haciendo un ruido innecesario con las botas e incluso resoplando una o dos veces: «¡Ahí te quedas con un cuello de castor!» El visitante los siguió con una mirada educada pero ligeramente curiosa. Dirigió después esa mirada a Paklin, como esperando que siguiera el ejemplo de los otros, pero Paklin, en cuyo rostro, desde su llegada, jugueteaba una sonrisa peculiarmente reprimida, se retiró hacia un rincón y se instaló allí. Entonces el visitante se sentó. Nezhdánov también.

-Mi nombre es Sipiaguin. Quizá ya haya oído hablar de mí -empezó el visitante con modesto orgullo.

Pero antes tenemos que contar las circunstancias en las que Nezhdánov se había encontrado anteriormente con él.

Con ocasión de la venida de Sadovski a San Petersburgo, fue presentada la pieza de Ostrovski *Cada cual a su* trineo. El papel de Rusakov es, como se sabe, uno de los preferidos del conocido actor. Antes de la cena, Nezhdánov fue a la taquilla, donde había mucha gente. Quería un lugar de platea, pero en el momento en que iba a llegar a la ventanilla, un oficial que estaba detrás alargó a la empleada, por encima de la cabeza de Nezhdánov, un billete de tres rublos:

Comentario [Librodot-13]: «Ne v svoí saní ne sadís'».

-Él -o sea, Nezhdánov- seguramente espera el cambio y yo no. Déme un asiento de primera fila... ¡tengo mucha prisa!

-Disculpe, señor oficial -exclamó rudamente Nezhdánov-, yo también quiero un asiento de primera fila -y alargó un billete de tres rublos, todo el dinero que tenía en aquel momento.

Recibió la entrada y por la noche apareció en el sector aristocrático del teatro Alexandrinski.

Iba mal vestido, sin guantes, con las botas sucias, incómodo y furioso consigo mismo por sentirse tan molesto. Sentado a su derecha estaba un general con numerosas estrellas; a la izquierda, el mismo hombre elegante llamado Sipiaguin, cuya aparición dos días después tanto asombró a Mashúrina y Ostrodúmov. El general, de vez en cuando, miraba a Nezhdánov, como a algo indecente, inusual y hasta ofensivo; Sipiaguin le observaba de lado, pero sin animosidad. Todos los rostros que rodeaban a Nezhdánov parecían grandes personajes. Se conocían muy bien unos a otros y cambiaban pequeñas conversaciones, observaciones, exclamaciones, saludos, incluso por encima de su cabeza. Pero él se quedó allí sentado sin moverse, incómodo en su gran y confortable poltrona, sintiéndose como un paria. Amargado y avergonzado, se sintió mal, la comedia de Ostrovski, así como la representación de Sadovski, le produjeron poco placer. Y de golpe -¡oh, maravilla!-en uno de los intervalos, su vecino de la izquierda -no el general lleno de estrellas sino el otro, sin ninguna señal de distinción en el pecho- le habló delicadamente y con amabilidad, con una cierta timidez. Empezó a hablar de la pieza de Ostrovski, quería saber la opinión de Nezhdánov por ser «un representante de la nueva generación». Sorprendido y un poco receloso, al principio Nezhdánov le respondió bruscamente y con monosílabos... hasta que el corazón le empezó a latir y se sintió vejado. ¿Por qué había de preocuparse? ¿No era un hombre como otro cualquiera? Y empezó a expresar sus opiniones libremente, sin restringirse, abierto, y cerca del final incluso en una voz tan alta y con tanto entusiasmo, que alarmó a su vecino estrellado. Nezhdánov era un ardiente admirador de Ostrovski, pero a pesar de todo el talento y genio del conocido autor, en la comedia *Cada cual a su trineo* no podía dejar de sentir claramente que quería disminuir la civilización a través del personaje burlesco de Vijoriov. Su amable vecino le escuchó con la mayor atención, con simpatía, y en el segundo intervalo le habló de nuevo, no ya de la comedia de Ostrovski sino de varios asuntos de la vida, de la ciencia y hasta de problemas políticos. Estaba evidentemente interesado en su joven y elocuente vecino. Nezhdánov no sólo no se sintió constreñido, sino que incluso empezó a exagerar, como si dijera: «Si tienes curiosidad, ¡aquí tienes!» Pero el general ya no estaba intranquilo sino indignado y desconfiado. Cuando la pieza terminó, Sipiaguin se despidió muy amablemente de Nezhdánov, pero no le preguntó el nombre ni le dio el suyo. Mientras esperaba su carruaje a

la puerta, encontró un viejo amigo, ayudante de campo, el Príncipe G. «Te vi desde mi palco», le dijo el Príncipe a través del bigote perfumado, «¿sabes con quién estuviste hablando?» «No, no lo sé...» «Un muchacho muy listo, ¿verdad?» «Muy listo. ¿Quién es?» El Príncipe se acercó a él y le murmuró al oído, en francés: «Es mi hermano. Sí, es mi hermano. Ilegítimo, claro... se llama Nezhdánov. Un día te contaré... Mi padre no esperaba una de estas, por eso le llamó Nezhdánov. Pero le cuidó... *il lui a fait un sort*... Le damos una mensualidad. Es listo y tuvo una buena educación gracias al padre. Pero perdió el juicio, parece que es republicano... No lo recibimos... *Il est impossible*n Pero disculpa, mi carruaje está allí.» El Príncipe se marchó, y al día siguiente Sipiaguin leyó en el periódico «La Gaceta de la Policía» el anuncio con las señas de Nezhdánov y fue a verle.

-Mi nombre es Sipiaguin -dijo, sentándose en una silla de mimbre y examinándole con una mirada dignificante-. Supe por el periódico que desea trabajo y he venido a ofrecerle una posición. Estoy casado y tengo un hijo de nueve años, un niño, debo decirle francamente, muy dotado. Pasamos la mayor parte del verano y el otoño en la provincia, en S., a menos de cinco verstas de la capital del distrito. Mi propuesta es esta: ¿le interesa estar allá durante las vacaciones y enseñar gramática e historia a mi hijo? ¿No son esas las asignaturas que menciona en su anuncio? Creo que se llevará bien conmigo, con mi familia y con el vecindario. Tenemos un bello jardín, un río, el aire es excelente, la casa espaciosa... ¿Está de acuerdo? En ese caso sólo nos queda saber sus condiciones, aunque no creo -añadió Sipiaguin con una pequeña mueca- que a ese respecto pueda surgir ninguna dificultad entre nosotros.

Durante todo el tiempo que Sipiaguin habló, Nezhdánov no apartó los ojos de él, de su pequeña cabeza un poco inclinada hacia un lado, de su frente baja, estrecha, pero inteligente, de su fina nariz romana, de sus ojos agradables, de sus labios rectos, por donde salían sus palabras amables, de sus patillas a la manera inglesa; miraba y pensaba: «Pero ¿qué es esto? ¿Por qué razón este hombre me busca? ¡Este aristócrata y yo! ¿Qué tenemos nosotros en común? ¿Qué le trae hasta mí?»

Estaba tan perdido en sus pensamientos que no abrió la boca cuando Sipiaguin calló esperando una respuesta. Echó una mirada hacia el rincón donde, observándole también, se encontraba Paklin. «¡Quizá la presencia de una tercera persona le impida contestar!» Levantó las cejas, como subordinándose a aquel ambiente donde había entrado de libre voluntad y, levantando también la voz, repitió la pregunta.

Nezhdánov se estremeció.

-La verdad es que -dijo apresuradamente-, estoy... acepto... con placer... sólo tengo que admitir... que no puedo dejar de sentirme sorprendido... no tengo recomendaciones... y las opiniones que manifesté anteayer en el teatro deberían haberle ahuyentado...

-En eso está completamente equivocado, mi querido Alexéi... ¡Alexéi Dmítrich! Es éste su nombre, ¿verdad? -dijo Sipiaguin con una sonrisa-. Me atrevo a decirle que soy conocido como un hombre de convicciones liberales, progresistas. Y, por el contrario, sus opiniones, con la única reserva de lo que en ellas había de juvenil, de exagerado... ¡no se ofenda!... no divergen mucho de las mías... y hasta me encantó el entusiasmo propio de su juventud.

Sipiaguin habló sin la mínima vacilación. Como miel, sus palabras escurrían suavemente.

-Mi mujer comparte mis ideas -continuó-. Los puntos de vista de usted quizá estén más cerca de los de ella que de los míos, lo que es natural, puesto que ella es más joven que yo. Cuando el otro día, después de nuestro encuentro, leí su nombre en el periódico y, contra la costumbre general, su dirección (había sabido ya su nombre en el teatro) entonces... ese... hecho me chocó. Vi en él... en esa coincidencia... perdóneme por ser supersticioso... por decirlo de alguna manera, el dedo del destino. Usted habló también de recomendaciones. Pero no me hacen ninguna falta. Su aire, su personalidad despertaron mi simpatía. Estoy acostumbrado a creer en mi intuición. Entonces... ¿está de acuerdo?

-Sí... ciertamente... -respondió Nezhdánov-. Intentaré ser digno de su confianza. Sólo hay una cosa de la que quiero informarle antes: estoy dispuesto a ser profesor de su hijo, pero no a cuidarle. No tengo aptitud para eso... y no quiero atarme, no quiero perder mi libertad.

Sipiaguin agitó levemente la mano como si ahuyentara una mosca.

Comentario [Librodot-14]: Nezhdánov significa «aquél que no es esperado».

Comentario [Librodot-15]: Le hizo un legado.

Comentario [Librodot-16]: ¡Es imposible!

Comentario [Librodot-17]: Politséiskaia Védomost.

Comentario [Librodot-18]: Los patronímicos rusos pueden tener diversas formas, a partir del nombre del padre con varios sufijos, por lo que Dmítrievich y Dmítrich (más adelante se encontrará aún Dmítriev) son realmente formas diferentes del mismo patronímico.

Librodot

-Puede estar tranquilo... Usted no está hecho para eso, para ser criado. Yo no necesito un criado. Buscaba un profesor... y le encontré. Bien, ¿y sobre las condiciones? Ya sabe..., las condiciones financieras... el vil metal...

Nezhdánov no sabía qué decir.

-Mire -dijo Sipiaguin, inclinando el cuerpo hacia adelante y tocándose la rodilla con la punta de los dedos- entre gente seria estas cosas se resuelven con dos palabras. Le doy cien rublos al mes y gastos de viaje por mi cuenta. ¿De acuerdo?

Nezhdánov se ruborizó de nuevo.

-Es mucho más de lo que yo habría pedido... porque... yo...

-Magnífico, magnífico... -interrumpió Sipiaguin-. Considero el asunto resuelto... y le considero ya un miembro de la casa -se levantó de la silla y, de repente, estaba muy alegre y expansivo, como si hubiese recibido un regalo. Todos sus movimientos exhibían una cierta familiaridad amable e incluso juguetona-. Marchamos dentro de pocos días -dijo con desenvoltura-, me agrada mucho estar en el campo cuando llega la primavera, aunque sea un hombre siempre muy ocupado, agarrado a la ciudad... Me gustaría que empezara a contar su primer mes a partir de hoy. Mi mujer y mi hijo ya están en Moscú. Me precedieron. Les encontraremos en el campo... en el seno de la naturaleza. Nosotros iremos juntos... como solteros. ¡Ah! ¡Ah! -Sipiaguin rió por la nariz de una manera coqueta-. Y ahora...

Sacó del bolsillo de su abrigo una cartera plateada y negra, de la cual extrajo una tarjeta.

-Aquí está mi morada de invierno. Venga a verme mañana... a eso del mediodía. Allí hablaremos mejor. Me gustaría contarle algunas de mis ideas sobre educación... Bien... y convendremos el día de la partida -Sipiaguin apretó la mano de Nezhdánov-. Y, a propósito -dijo, bajando la voz e inclinando un poco la cabeza-, si necesita un anticipo... Por favor, ¡sin cumplidos! Puedo darle un mes de adelanto.

Nezhdánov no sabía qué responder y miraba pensativo aquel rostro brillante, amistoso y a la vez extraño, pero que le era a la vez tan íntimo y que le sonreía animosamente.

¿No necesita? ¿No? -susurró Sipiaguin.

-Si me permite, se lo diré mañana -murmuró por fin Nezhdánov.

-¡Espléndido! En ese caso, ¡adiós! ¡Hasta mañana! -Sipiaguin dejó la mano de Nezhdánov y se dispuso a salir.

-Me dijo hace poco que supo mi nombre en el teatro -dijo Nezhdánov antes de que el otro marchara-. ¿Puedo preguntarle quién se lo dijo?

¿Quién? Ah, una persona que le conoce muy bien, parece que es pariente suyo, el Príncipe... el Príncipe G.

-¿El ayudante de campo?

-Sí, él mismo.

Nezhdánov se ruborizó aún más que antes y abrió la boca... pero no dijo nada. Sipiaguin le apretó de nuevo la mano, pero esta vez sin mediar palabra y, haciendo una reverencia primero a él y después a

Paklin, junto a la puerta se puso el sombrero y salió con una sonrisa de satisfacción en el rostro, lo que revelaba la profunda impresión que aquella visita le había causado.

IV

APENAS Sipiaguin había tenido tiempo de pasar el umbral, ya Paklin saltaba de su silla y, corriendo hacia Nezhdánov, le felicitaba.

-¡Que magnífico pez! -repetía Paklin, riendo y moviendo las piernas-. ¿Y sabe quién es? ¡Es un hombre famoso, un chambelán, uno de los pilares de nuestra sociedad, futuro ministro!

-Me es totalmente desconocido -observó Nezhdánov, abatido.

Paklin abrió los ojos desesperado.

-He ahí nuestro problema, Alexéi Dmítrich: ¡no conocemos a nadie! Queremos actuar, queremos girar el mundo cabeza abajo, pero vivimos fuera de ese mismo mundo, sólo con dos

o tres amigos, apretados en el mismo lugar...

-Disculpe -dijo Nezhdánov-, pero eso no es verdad. Lo que en realidad nos ocurre, es que no queremos mezclarnos con nuestros enemigos, sino con nuestros amigos, con el pueblo...

-¡Espera, espera, espera! -le interrumpió Paklin-. En primer lugar, y relativo a los enemigos, recuerda los versos de Goethe:

Wer den Dichter will versteh'n,

Muss in Dichter's Lande geh'n...

Comentario [Librodot-19]: Quien quiere al poeta entender, Debe en su tierra vivir...

a los que yo añado:

Wer die Feinde *will versteh 'n*

Muss in Feindes *Lande geh'n*

Comentario [Librodot-20]: Quien quiere al enemigo entender, Debe en su tierra vivir...

»Estar apartado de nuestros enemigos, no conocer sus hábitos ni su vida... es absurdo. ¡Ab-sur-do!... ¡Sí! ¡Sí! Si yo quiero matar un lobo en el monte, he de conocer todos sus escondites... Además, ahora mismo hablaste de mezclarte con el pueblo... ¡Oh, amigo mío! En 1862, los polacos formaron sus bandas en el monte y nosotros vamos ahora a ese mismo monte, o sea al pueblo, que para nosotros es tan denso y oscuro como el monte para los polacos.

-Entonces, según tu opinión, ¿que deberíamos hacer?

-Los hindúes se lanzaban bajo las medas del Juggernaut -continuó Paklin tristemente-, que les aplastaba, y morían en éxtasis. Nosotros también tenemos nuestro Juggernaut... Y también nos aplasta, pero sin éxtasis.

-Entonces, en tu opinión, ¿qué deberíamos hacer? -repitió Nezhdánov, casi gritando-. ¿Escribir novelas de propaganda?

Paklin juntó las manos e inclinó la cabeza hacia su hombro izquierdo.

-Sea como sea, tú podrías escribir novelas, ya que tienes una vena literaria... Bien, no te enfades, no diré nada más. Sé perfectamente que no te gusta que te hable de eso, pero estoy de acuerdo contigo: escribir estas anécdotas tan rellenas y encima en estilo moderno: «¡Ah! ¡Te quiero! -*saltó* ella...», «¡Da igual! -dijo él rascándose», es muy triste. Por eso repito: conoce primero todas las clases empezando por las más altas. No debemos depender sólo de tipos como Ostrodúmov. Son personas muy dignas y honestas... pero son muy estúpidos.

Mira sólo a nuestro amigo. Ni tan siquiera las suelas de sus botas son como las que usan las personas inteligentes. ¿Por qué razón huyó hace poco? ¡No quería estar en la misma sala con un aristócrata, respirar el mismo aire que él!

-Por favor, no hables así de Ostrodúmov delante de mí -contestó Nezhdánov groseramente-. Usa botas gruesas porque son baratas.

-No quería decir eso... -replicó Paklin.

-Y si no quiere estar en la misma sala con un aristócrata -continuó Nezhdánov levantando la voz-, sólo merece elogios, y lo que es más, significa que es capaz de sacrificarse, afrontar la muerte, cosa que nosotros nunca haremos.

Paklin hizo una mueca triste y señaló sus piernas torcidas y flacas.

-¿Cómo puedo yo luchar, mi querido Alexéi Dmítrich? ¡Por favor! Pero más allá de todo eso... repito: estoy muy contento de que te hayas acercado al señor Sipiaguin ya que en este acercamiento preveo incluso gran utilidad a nuestra causa. ¡Llegarás a los altos círculos! Verás las «leonas», esas mujeres con cuerpos de terciopelo y resortes de acero, como se dice en las «Cartas sobre España». ¡Conócelas, mi querido, conócelas! Si tú fueras un epicúreo, tendría miedo por ti. Pero esos no son realmente tus objetivos.

Comentario [Librodot-21]: Como eran conocidas las mujeres de la aristocracia rusa a mediados del siglo X*IX.*

Comentario [Librodot-22]: *Pis'ma ob Ispánii,* de V.P. Botkin (1811-1869), que se refiere a la gracia de las mujeres españolas precisamente con estas palabras.

-Voy a trabajar -dijo Nezhdánov-, para no tener que apretarme el cinturón... -«Y para

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desembarazarme de vosotros», pensó.

-¡Claro, claro! Y por eso te digo: ¡aprende! ¡Qué perfume dejó ese bárin!

Comentario [Librodot-23]: El bárin es el propietario rural, amo de siervos en la Rusia zarista. Normalmente no pertenecía a la aristocracia, sino que formaba una clase media alta poderosa, que era el principal soporte del régimen.

Paklin olió el aire.

-¡El auténtico «ámbar» con el que soñaba la mujer del gobernador en *El inspector* de Gogol!

-Habló de mí con el Príncipe G. -observó Nezhdánov sordamente, acercándose de nuevo a la ventana-. Ahora debe de saber toda mi historia.

-No debe, ¡puedes estar seguro de que la sabe! Pero ¿que importancia tiene eso? Apuesto a que fue precisamente por eso por lo que pensó contratarte. Es evidente que tú eres un aristócrata... por la sangre, o sea, uno de los suyos. Pero me estoy retrasando. Tengo que volver a mi despacho, al despacho del explotador. ¡Adiós, hermano!

Paklin se dirigió hacia la puerta, pero se detuvo y se volvió.

-Oye, Aliosha -dijo con una voz insinuante-, ya me rechazaste hace poco y ahora tendrás dinero, ya lo sé, pero aún así ¡permíteme que me sacrifique un poco por nuestra causa común! No puedo hacer nada más, excepto con el bolsillo. Mira, he puesto un billete de diez rublos sobre la mesa. ¿Aceptas?

Nezhdánov no respondió ni se movió.

-Quien calla otorga. ¡Gracias! -exclamó Paklin alegremente. Y desapareció.

Nezhadánov se quedó solo. Continuó mirando por la ventana el patio triste, donde ni siquiera en el verano entraba el sol, y se sintió descorazonado.

Nezhdánov era hijo, como ya sabemos, del Príncipe G., un rico ayudante de campo, y de la señorita de compañía de su hija, una muchacha muy bonita que murió en el parto. Nezhdánov tuvo la primera educación como interno en un colegio dirigido por un suizo, un pedagogo enérgico y severo, y después entró en la universidad. Quería estudiar Derecho, pero el general, su padre, que odiaba a los nihilistas, lo dirigió hacia la «estética», como Nezhdánov decía con una sonrisa amarga, o sea, hacia la facultad de Historia y Filología. Su padre acostumbraba a verle como máximo tres o cuatro veces al año, pero se interesaba por él, y cuando se murió le dejó «en memoria de Nastionka» (la madre), un capital de seis mil rublos de plata, cuyos intereses, con el nombre de «mensualidad», le daba su hermano, el Príncipe G. Con razón, pues, Paklin decía que era un aristócrata. Todo en él recordaba su origen: la pequeñez de las orejas, las manos, los pies, las facciones pequeñas pero finas, la piel delicada, el pelo ondeado, la propia voz, ligeramente gutural pero agradable. Era muy nervioso, muy presumido, susceptible e incluso antojadizo. La falsa posición con que se encontró desde la infancia le tornó sensible e irritable, pero su generosidad natural no había permitido que se volviese desconfiado y receloso. Esta misma falsa posición de Nezhdánov era la causa de una profunda inconsistencia que dominaba todo su ser. Aseado hasta la exageración, horriblemente sensible, intentaba ser cínico y hablar con rudeza; era un idealista por naturaleza, apasionado y casto, osado y tímido a la vez y, como un pecador arrepentido, se avergonzaba de sus pecados y de su castidad y consideraba un deber reírse del idealismo. Tenía un corazón tierno y evitaba a los demás; se amargaba, pero nunca olvidaba el mal. Se enfureció con el padre por haberle lanzado a la «estética», y se interesó abiertamente por la política y las cuestiones sociales, abrazó las opiniones más extremistas (¡que para él no eran simples frases!), pero secretamente sacaba gran placer de las artes, de la poesía, de la belleza en todas sus manifestaciones... e incluso escribía versos. Ocultaba cuidadosamente el cuaderno donde los copiaba, y de sus amigos en San Petersburgo, sólo Paklin, debido a su especial intuición, sospechaba de su existencia. Nada hería ni ofendía más a Nezhdánov que cualquier mención a su poesía, a esa su, como él decía, imperdonable debilidad. El profesor suizo le había enseñado muchas cosas y no temía el trabajo; trabajaba con placer, bastante, honesta y febrilmente, pero sin continuidad. Los amigos le apreciaban... Les atraía su sentido natural de la justicia, su generosidad y pureza de intenciones; pero Nezhdánov no había nacido bajo una buena estrella y la vida no le era fácil. Pensaba que estaba bien que fuese así, pero se sentía solo, a pesar del afecto de los amigos.

Continuó de pie meditando delante de la ventana. Le venían pensamientos tristes y opresivos sobre su próximo viaje, sobre el nuevo e inesperado cambio de su destino... Pero le daba pena abandonar San Petersburgo; no dejaría nada que le fuera particularmente querido; y sabía que estaría de regreso en el otoño. Sin embargo, dudaba: se sentía involuntariamente melancólico.

«¡Qué magnífico profesor!», pensó. «¡Qué pedagogo!»

Casi estaba a punto de censurarse por haber aceptado los deberes de profesor. Y hubiera sido injusto hacerlo. Nezhdánov tenía suficiente cultura y, a pesar de su temperamento inestable, los niños le aceptaban sin dificultad y a él mismo le gustaban los niños. La tristeza que le dominaba se debía a la sensación que generalmente siente una persona cuando tiene que mudarse de lugar, un sentimiento experimentado por todas las personas soñadoras y desconocido por los temperamentos enérgicos, sanguíneos, que siempre se alegran con cualquier interrupción que destruya la rutina de la vida. Nezhdánov estaba tan inmerso en sus pensamientos, que, poco a poco, casi sin darse cuenta, empezaron a tomar la forma de palabras; sus sensaciones divagadoras empezaron a ordenarse en cadencias medidas...

-¡Diablo! exclamó en voz alta-. ¡Parece que esté escribiendo poesía!

Se encogió de hombros y se apartó de la ventana; vio sobre la mesa el billete de diez rublos de Paklin, se lo metió en el bolsillo y empezó a pasear por la habitación.

-Tengo que conseguir el anticipo -pensó-. ¡Qué buena sugerencia! Cien rublos... de mis hermanos, de Sus Excelencias, cien rublos... Necesito cincuenta para pagar las deudas, cincuenta o sesenta para el viaje... el resto es para Ostrodúmov. Hay todavía lo que me hadado Paklin. Es también para él... Y aún puedo conseguir algo de Merkúlov...

Durante estos cálculos, las anteriores cadencias rítmicas se reafirmaron. Se quedó allí, pensando... con los ojos fijos en el mismo lugar. Después, sus manos, como a tientas, buscaron y abrieron el cajón de la mesa, del cual sacaron un cuaderno muy usado...

Se dejó caer en la silla, con la misma mirada, cogió la pluma y, canturreando a media voz y sacudiendo de vez en cuando el pelo ondeado, empezó a escribir línea tras línea, a veces tachando y volviendo a escribir.

La puerta que daba al corredor se abrió un poco y apareció la cabeza de Mashúrina. Nezhdánov no se dio cuenta y continuó con su trabajo. Mashúrina estuvo mucho tiempo de pie mirándole atentamente y, sacudiendo la cabeza, retrocedió. Pero Nezhdánov se enderezó de golpe, miró alrededor y, al verla, exclamó aburrido:

¯¡Ah, es usted! -y lanzó el cuaderno al cajón.

Entonces Mashúrina entró de nuevo en la habitación con pasos firmes.

-Ostrodúmov me pidió que viniera -dijo ella lentamente-, para saber cuándo podremos tener el dinero. Si puede tenerlo hoy, aún podríamos marchar esta noche.

-Hoy no puede ser -dijo Nezhdánov frunciendo la frente-. ¿Puede venir mañana?

-¿A qué hora?

-A las dos.

-De acuerdo.

Mashúrina quedó callada durante unos instantes y, de golpe, le alargó la mano.

-Parece que le interrumpí, perdón. Pero... me marcho. ¡Quién sabe si volveremos a vernos! Quería despedirme.

Nezhdánov apretó sus dedos colorados, fríos.

-¿Vio a aquel hombre aquí hace poco? -empezó él-. Llegamos a un acuerdo. Me voy a su casa en la provincia S., cerca de la capital.

El rostro de Mashúrina se abrió con una sonrisa alegre.

-¡Cerca de S.! Entonces quizá aún nos encontremos. Es posible que nos manden allá -Mashúrina suspiró-. Ah, Alexéi Dmítrich...

-¿Qué hay? -preguntó Nezhdánov.

Mashúrina tenía un aire tenso.

-Nada, ¡perdón! ¡Nada!

Le apretó la mano una vez más y salió.

«En todo San Petersburgo no hay nadie que me trate tan amablemente como esta...

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persona tan excéntrica», pensó. «Pero no debía haberme interrumpido... Sin embargo, era con la mejor de las intenciones.»

A la mañana siguiente, Nezhdánov se dirigió a casa de Sipiaguin y fue recibido en un magnífico despacho amueblado al viejo estilo pero de acuerdo con la dignidad de un estadista liberal. Este, sentado tras una enorme mesa sobre la cual se acumulaban numerosos papeles inútiles, en el orden más rígido, y numerosos cortaplumas de marfil que nunca habían cortado nada, habló, y durante una hora entera Nezhdánov escuchó al librepensador haciendo brotar sus sabias, corteses, condescendientes palabras. Al final recibió un anticipo de cien rublos, y diez días después se sentaba en el asiento de terciopelo de un compartimiento reservado de primera clase, al lado de aquel estadista sabio y liberal, camino de Moscú; a través de los raíles trepidantes del ferrocarril de Nikoláievski.

V

EN la sala de visitas de una gran casa de piedra con columnas y un frontispicio griego, construida en los años veinte del presente siglo por el padre de Sipiaguin, conocido agrónomo y «pendenciero», Valentina Mijáilovna, esposa de Sipiaguin, una mujer muy bella, esperaba en cualquier momento la llegada del marido, después de haber recibido un telegrama. La decoración de la sala de visitas era del mejor estilo moderno, de gusto delicado: todo allí era bello y acogedor, todo, desde los agradables paños de cretona y las cortinas a las variadas porcelanas, bronces y cristalerías dispuestos sobre mesas y aparadores, todo armonizándose suave y ordenadamente -y bien combinado- con los alegres rayos de sol de un día de mayo que entraban por las grandes ventanas abiertas. La atmósfera de la sala, pesada por el olor de lirios de los valles (grandes ramos de estas bellas flores primaverales estaban distribuidos por la sala), era agitada de vez en cuando por una brisa leve que soplaba suavemente procedente del jardín.

Comentario [Librodot-24]: O sea, del siglo XIX

¡Qué bello cuadro! Y la propia señora de la casa, Valentina Mijáilovna Sipiaguin, lo completaba, le daba significado y vida. Era una mujer alta, de unos treinta años, pelo castaño oscuro, morena, pero fresca, con un rostro semejante al de la Madonna Sixtina, con los ojos aterciopelados, maravillosos, profundos. Tenía los labios algo gruesos y pálidos, los hombros un poco altos, las manos un poco grandes... Pero, a pesar de todo eso, cualquier persona que la viera caminando por la sala de visitas, inclinando su frágil cintura sobre las flores y con una sonrisa en los labios o arreglando alguna maceta china, o componiendo rápidamente el pelo reluciente delante de un espejo, entreabriendo los ojos tan bellos; cualquier persona, decimos nosotros, ciertamente diría para sí, o incluso en voz alta, que nunca había encontrado un ser más fascinante.

Un bello chiquillo de unos nueve años, con un traje de cuadros, las piernas descubiertas, embadurnado de pomadas y con el pelo muy rizado, entró corriendo a la sala y paró de golpe al ver Valentina Mijáilovna.

-¿Qué hay, Kolia? -preguntó ella. Tenía la voz suave y aterciopelada como los ojos.

Comentario [Librodot-25]: Diminutivo de Nikolái.

-Mamá, mira -empezó el muchacho, confuso-, la tía me mandó... a buscar unos lirios de los valles... para su habitación... ella no tiene...

Valentina Mijáilovna puso la mano bajo la barbilla del hijo y levantó su cabeza llena de pomada.

-Di a la tía que pida lirios de los valles al jardinero, que estos son míos... No quiero que los toquen. Dile que no me gusta que me desordenen las cosas. ¿Puedes repetir todo esto?

-Sí... -murmuró el pequeño.

-Entonces, repite.

-Digo... digo... que tu no quieres.

Valentina Mijáilovna rió. Y también su risa era suave. -Veo que aún no se te pueden dar recados. Da igual, dile lo que quieras.

El muchacho besó apresuradamente la mano adornada de anillos de la madre y corrió hacia fuera.

Valentina Mijáilovna le siguió con la vista, suspiró, se dirigió hasta una jaula de alambre dorado cerca de la pared, donde, equilibrándose cuidadosamente con el pico y las garras, se encontraba un papagayo verde, le acarició con la punta del dedo; después se dejó caer en un sofá estrecho y, cogiendo de una pequeña mesa redonda el último número de la «Revue des Deux Mondes», empezó a hojearla.

Una tos respetuosa la hizo mirar alrededor. En la puerta estaba un criado con una bella librea y corbata blanca.

-¿Qué hay, Agafón? -preguntó Valentina Mijáilovna con la misma voz suave.

-Está aquí Semión Petróvich Kaloméitsev. ¿Le hago pasar?

-Sí, claro. Y di a Marianna Vikéntievna que venga a la sala de visitas.

Valentina Mijáilovna lanzó la «Revue des Deux Mondes» encima de la mesita y, recostándose en el sofá, levantó los ojos hacia el techo, pensativa, en una actitud que le sentaba muy bien.

Por la manera como Semión Petróvich Kaloméitsev, un hombre joven, de treinta y dos años, entró en la sala, familiar, desenvuelto y lánguido; por la manera como, de golpe, se iluminó agradablemente, como hizo una reverencia de lado y como se enderezó graciosamente después; como le habló no muy austeramente ni con demasiada amabilidad; como cogió respetuosamente y depuso un beso en la mano de Valentina Mijáilovna, por todo eso se podía ver que el recién venido no era un provinciano, no era un simple vecino rico, sino un auténtico «gran señor» de San Petersburgo, de la más alta sociedad. Iba vestido a la última moda inglesa: la punta_ colorida del pañuelo de cambray le salía del bolsillo de la chaqueta matinal; en una cinta negra bastante ancha se balanceaba un monóculo; el tono claro de los guantes de gamuza armonizaba con los pantalones de cuadros. Iba muy bien afeitado, tenía el pelo corto y el rostro un poco afeminado, con los ojos pequeños, juntos, la nariz achatada, los labios carnosos y rojos, hacían patente la buena disposición de un caballero bien nacido. Respiraba afabilidad... que fácilmente se transformaba en desprecio, incluso en rudeza, si alguien se atrevía a molestarle o perturbar sus principios conservadores, patrióticos y religiosos. Entonces el refinamiento se transformaba instantáneamente; sus ojos delicados se encendían con un brillo cruel; su bella boca profería palabras malsonantes -y ¡recurría a las autoridades!

La familia de Semión Petróvich procedía de sencillos jardineros. Su bisabuelo había recibido el nombre del lugar donde había nacido: Koloméntsov... Pero su abuelo ya lo había transformado, pasando a escribirlo Kaloméitsev, su padre escribía Kaloméitsev y, por fin, Semión Petróvich le cambió la e en *iat y,* muy seriamente, se consideraba un auténtico aristócrata; llegaba a decir que su familia descendía de los famosos barones Von-Gallenmeier, uno de los cuales había sido mariscal de campo durante la Guerra de los Treinta Años. Semión Petróvich trabajaba en la corte ministerial, donde era chambelán; su patriotismo le había impedido entrar en la carrera diplomática para la que todo parecía llamarle: la educación, los hábitos de sociedad, el éxito con las mujeres, *y* el mismo porte... *mais quiter la Russie? Jamais!* Kaloméitsev ocupaba las mejores posiciones y tenía las mejores relaciones. Pasaba por ser un hombre prometedor y de confianza -*«un peu trop... féodal dans ses opinions»,* como observó el príncipe B., una de las lumbreras del mundo oficial de San Petersburgo. Kaloméitsev había venido a pasar dos meses en el campo, para cuidar de la finca, o sea, «para amenazar y tiranizar» a sus campesinos. «¡De otra manera no se avanza!», acostumbraba a decir.

Comentario [Librodot-26]: Letra del antiguo alfabeto ruso, con el mismo valor de la *e, y* por la cual fue realmente substituida en la reforma ortográfica de 1918.

Comentario [Librodot-27]: Pero ¿salir de Rusia? ¡Nunca!

Comentario [Librodot-28]: Un poco demasiado... feudal en sus opiniones.

-Creía que Boris Andreích ya había llegado -empezó él balanceándose suavemente de una pierna a otra. De golpe se enderezó y miró de lado, en una pose muy significativa.

Valentina Mijáilovna hizo una pequeña mueca. ¿De otro modo no hubiera venido?

Kaloméitsev retrocedió un paso ante esta respuesta tan injusta y absurda de la señora Sipiaguin.

-¡Valentina Mijáilovna! -exclamó-. Por favor, ¿cómo puede decir tal cosa...?

-Bien, bien, bien, siéntese. Boris Andreích no tardará. Ya envié el carruaje a la estación a recogerle. Si espera un poco... podrá verle. ¿Qué hora es?

-Las dos y media -respondió Kaloméitsev, sacando del bolsillo del chaleco un gran reloj de oro esmaltado y mostrándolo a Valentina Mijáilovna-. ¿Ya vio mi reloj? Es un regalo de Mijaíl, sabe... el príncipe servio... Obrénovich. Aquí están sus iniciales... vea. ¡Gran compañero! Y tiene una mano de hierro, como debe tener un gobernante. ¡Oh, no le gustan nada las bromas! No... no... ¡nada!

Kaloméitsev se dejó caer en un sillón, cruzó las piernas y empezó lentamente a quitarse el guante izquierdo.

-Aquí, en nuestra provincia, ¡sí que nos haría falta un hombre como Mijaíl!

¿Y por qué? ¿No está satisfecho con la situación? Kaloméitsev frunció la nariz.

-¡Es este Consejo Rural! ¡Este Consejo Rural! ¿Para qué sirve esto? Sólo debilita la administración y excita... las ideas equivocadas... -Kaloméitsev hizo gestos enel aire con la mano izquierda liberada de la presión del guante- ...y las falsas esperanzas -se sopló la mano-. Ya hablé del caso en San Petersburgo... *mais,* bah! Es aquí donde soplan los malos vientos. Incluso su marido... por ejemplo, ¡pero él es un conocido liberal!

La señora Sipiaguin se enderezó en el sofá.

-¿Cómo? ¿Usted, *m'sié* Kaloméitsev, oponiéndose al Gobierno?

-¿Yo? ¿Oponiéndome? ¡Nunca! ¡Nada de eso! *Mais j'ai mon franc parler.* Algunas veces puedo criticar, pero siempre obediente.

-Pues en mi caso es lo contrario: no critico... y no soy obediente.

-Ah, mais c'est un mot! Yo, si me lo permite, repetiré esa frase a mi amigo *Ladislas, vous savez,* que está escribiendo una novela sobre la alta sociedad y ya me leyó algunas partes. ¡Será fascinante! *Nous aurons enfin le grand monde russe peint par luí méme.*

-¿Dónde se publicará?

-Evidentemente, en «El heraldo ruso». Es nuestra «Revue des Deux Mondes». Veo que la lee.

-Sí, pero en los últimos tiempos ha estado muy aburrida.

-Quizá... quizá... Y «El heraldo ruso» también, hace algún tiempo, por usar una expresión vulgar, es algo tostón.

Kaloméitsev sonrió abiertamente. Le divirtió haber dicho la palabra «tostón».

-Mais c'est un journal qui se respecte -continuó-. Y eso es lo principal. Lamento tener que decírselo, pero... la literatura rusa me interesa poco. Es todo tan horriblemente vulgar actualmente. Hemos llegado al punto en que la protagonista de una novela es una cocinera, *parole d'honneur!* Pero la novela de Ladislas, sí, esa sí la leeré. *Il y aura le petít mot pour ríre...* y tendrá objetivo. ¡Objetivo! Los nihilistas serán aplastados... y en eso estoy de acuerdo con el pensamiento de Ladislas, *qui est tras* correct.

-Lo que ya no puede decirse de su pasado -observó la señora Sipiaguin.

Ah!Jetons un voile sur les erreurs de sa jeunesse! -exclamó Kaloméitsev, quitándose el otro guante.

La señora Sipiaguin entreabrió los ojos y le miró con coquetería.

-Semión Petróvich -exclamó-, ¿puedo preguntarle por qué razón, cuando habla ruso, utiliza tantas palabras francesas? Me parece un poco pasado de moda, si me permite la observación...

-¿Por qué? ¿Por qué? No todos dominan magistralmente su idioma materno como, por ejemplo, Valentina Mijáilovna. En cuanto a mí, tengo un gran respeto por la lengua rusa. No hay como el ruso para dar órdenes o para fines gubernamentales. ¡Me gusta mantener el idioma puro! ¡Me inclino ante Karamzín!... Pero el ruso, por decirlo así, como idioma de cada día... ¿Cómo será posible utilizarlo? Por ejemplo, cómo diría de repente, *de tout á l'heure: «C'est un motes?* ¿«Es una palabra»? ¡No!

-Yo diría: una expresión feliz.

Kaloméitsev rió.

-¡Una expresión feliz! ¡Mi querida Valentina Mijáilovna! Realmente, ¿no siente que... huele a instituto... que desapareció toda la sal?

Comentario [Librodot-29]: Mijaíl III Obrénovich, rey de Servia de 1860 a 1868.

Comentario [Librodot-30]: Se refiere al Zemstvo, consejo electivo de distrito creado en Rusia después de la emancipación de los siervos y que funcionó entre 1864 y 1917.

Comentario [Librodot-31]: Pero, ¡ay!

Comentario [Librodot-32]: Pero hago mis confidencias.

Comentario [Librodot-33]: ¡Ah, eso es una broma!

Comentario [Librodot-34]: Ladislao, ¿sabe?

Comentario [Librodot-35]: Alusión a Boleslav Mijáilovich Markévich (18221884), novelista, enemigo furibundo del movimiento democrático, que trabajó durante muchos años en el ministerio del interior.

Comentario [Librodot-36]: Tendremos finalmente la alta sociedad rusa pintada por ella misma.

Comentario [Librodot-37]: «Russkii véstnik».

Comentario [Librodot-38]: Pero es una revista digna de respeto.

Comentario [Librodot-39]: ¡Palabra de honor!

Comentario [Librodot-40]: Tendrá un poco de humor.

Comentario [Librodot-41]: Que es muy correcto.

Comentario [Librodot-42]: ¡Ah, echemos un velo sobre los errores de su juventud!

Comentario [Librodot-43]: Importante escritor (1766-1826), que tenía como lema: «Escribir como se habla y hablar como se escribe.» Junto con Pushkin, es considerado uno de los fundadores del moderno idioma literario ruso y de la literatura rusa.

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-No me convence. Pero ¿dónde está Marianna? Sonó el timbre y entró un criado.

-Mandé llamar a Marianna. ¿No se lo han dicho?

El criado iba a responder, cuando detrás de él, en la puerta, apareció una muchacha con una blusa amplia, oscura, y con el pelo corto. Era Marianna Vikéntievna Siniétskaia, sobrina de Sipiaguin por el lado materno.

VI

PERDON, Valentina Mijáilovna -dijo Marianna acercándose-, estaba ocupada y me demoré. Después hizo una reverencia a Kaloméitsev y, retirándose un poco de lado, se sentó en un pequeño taburete cerca del papagayo que, tan pronto la vio, empezó a aletear y a acercarse a ella.

-¿Por qué te sientas tan lejos, Marianna? -preguntó la señora Sipiaguin, que la había seguido con la mirada hasta el taburete-. ¿Quieres estar cerca de tu amiguito? Vea esto, Semión Petróvich -dijo ella, volviéndose hacia Kaloméitsev-, el papagayo está simplemente perdido de amores por nuestra Marianna...

-¡No me sorprende nada!

-Y a mí no me soporta.

-Eso, sí, ¡es sorprendente! ¿Quizá le haya reñido?

-Nunca, al contrario. Incluso le doy terrones de azúcar. Pero no come nada de mi mano. No... es un caso de simpatía... y antipatía...

Marianna miró severamente a la señora Sipiaguin... y la señora Sipiaguin le devolvió la mirada.

Aquellas dos mujeres no se gustaban.

Comparada con su tía, Marianna podía parecer casi «grosera». Su rostro era redondo, con una nariz grande, aquilina, los ojos grises, también grandes y muy brillantes, cejas finas, labios finos. Su pelo era castaño y espeso, y lo llevaba corto. Parecía tímida. Pero de todo su ser se desprendía algo fuerte e impetuoso, algo atrevido y apasionado. Tenía las manos y los pies pequeños. Su cuerpo, bajo, fuerte y flexible, recordaba una estatuilla florentina del siglo XVI. Sus movimientos eran gráciles y suaves.

La posición de Sinétskaia en la casa de Sipiaguin era bastante difícil. Su padre había sido un hombre muy inteligente y progresista, de origen polaco, que había llegado al puesto de general. Pero cuando se descubrió que había desviado fondos del cuartel... fue juzgado y condenado a la pérdida del puesto, de la nobleza, y al exilio en Siberia. Después fue indultado... Regresó, pero no tuvo fuerzas para empezar de nuevo. Murió en la miseria. Su esposa, hermana de Sipiaguin, madre de Marianna (no tenían más hijos que ella), no aguantó el choque de la pérdida de la posición y murió poco después que el marido. El tío Sipiaguin recibió a Marianna en su casa. Pero a ella, vivir con esta dependencia le repugnaba; deseaba la libertad con todas las fuerzas de su alma tenaz, y entre ella y la tía hervía una constante lucha latente. La señora Sipiaguin la consideraba una nihilista y una atea y, por su lado, Marianna odiaba a la tía por su involuntario despotismo. Evitaba al tío, como evitaba a las demás personas. Las evitaba, pero no les tenía miedo; su naturaleza no era cobarde.

-La antipatía -repitió Kaloméitsev-, es un sentimiento extraño. Todo el mundo sabe, por ejemplo, que yo soy un hombre profundamente religioso, ortodoxo, en toda la acepción de la palabra, pero a la vista de la cabellera revoloteante de un cura... no puedo quedarme indiferente: en seguida me irrito.

Para ilustrarlo, Kaloméitsev incluso levantó dos veces las manos cerradas como si el pecho se le agitase.

-De una manera general, el pelo le molesta mucho, Semión Petróvich -observó Marianna-. Estoy segura de que tampoco le agrada verlo corto, como el mío.

La señora Sipiaguin levantó las cejas lentamente y dejó caer la cabeza, como sorprendida por la familiaridad con que hoy en día las muchachas se metían en las

conversaciones, pero Kaloméitsev sonrió con condescendencia.

-Claro -dijo-, no puedo dejar de lamentar que unos bellos caracoles como los suyos, Marianna Vikéntievna, caigan bajo las hojas impías de un par de tijeras, pero no me despiertan antipatía: de cualquier manera...

su ejemplo incluso me podría... me podría... *convertir!*

Kaloméitsev no encontraba la palabra rusa, pero no quería hablar francés después de la observación de la señora de la casa.

-Gracias a Dios, Marianna todavía no usa gafas -observó la señora Sipiaguin-, y aún no ha dejado de lado cuellos y puños, aunque desgraciadamente estudie ciencias naturales y se interese por cuestiones feministas... ¿Verdad, Marianna?

Aquello era dicho con el fin evidente de molestarla, pero Marianna no se dejó perturbar.

-Sí, tía -respondió-, leo todo lo que se escribe sobre esos problemas. Tengo que comprender lo que es esta cuestión.

-¡Eso es juventud! -exclamó la señora Sipiaguin dirigiéndose a Kaloméitsev-. Nosotros ya no nos ocupamos de esas cosas, ¿verdad?

Kaloméitsev sonrió con simpatía: tenía que entrar en el juego de aquella señora tan amable.

-Marianna Vikéntievna -continuó él- aún está llena de ideas... el romanticismo de la juventud... que... con el tiempo...

-Por otro lado, estoy siendo injusta para conmigo -le interrumpió la señora Sipiaguin-, pues esas cuestiones también me interesan. Aún no soy vieja.

-También a mi me interesan -añadió Kaloméitsev apresuradamente-. Lo que pasa es que yo prohibo que se hable de esas cosas.

¿Prohibe que se hable de eso? -interrumpió Marianna.

-¡Sí! Yo diría al público: Interésense a gusto... pero hablar... ¡chitón! -y se puso un dedo en los labios-. Por lo menos, sin la menor duda, ¡prohibiría que se hablara de eso en la *prensa!*

La señora Sipiaguin sonrió.

¿Qué? ¿Tendría una comisión nombrada por los ministros para controlar esta cuestión?

-Naturalmente. ¿No cree que decidiríamos mejor nosotros que no todos esos gandules hambrientos que no ven más allá de sus narices e imaginan que son... genios? Podríamos nombrar a Borís Andréievich como presidente.

Comentario [Librodot-44]: Otra forma del patronímico Andreích.

La señora Sipiaguin rió aún más.

-Tiene que tener prudencia, porque Boris Andreích acostumbra a ser un poco jacobino...

-Jacó, jacó, jacó -gritó el papagayo.

Valentina Mijáilovna agitó el pañuelo en su dirección.

-¡No interrumpas a las personas inteligentes cuando conversan!... Marianna, enséñale buenas maneras.

Marianna se volvió hacia la jaula y empezó a golpear suavemente con el dedo el cuello del papagayo, que en seguida se acercó a ella.

-Sí -continuó la señora Sipiaguin-, Borís Andreích a menudo me sorprende incluso a mí. Hay en él un talante... un talante... de tribuno.

-*C'est parce qu'il est orateur!* -exclamó entusiásticamente Kaloméitsev en francés-. Su marido tiene el don de la palabra como nadie, y está acostumbrado...ses *propres paroles le grisent… y* hay en él el deseo de popularidad... Sin embargo, actualmente está un poco preocupado, ¿verdad? *Il bonde? Eh?*

Comentario [Librodot-45]: ¡Es porque él es orador!

Comentario [Librodot-46]: Sus propias palabras le cautivan...

Comentario [Librodot-47]: Está irritado, ¿verdad?

La señora Sipiaguin puso los ojos en Marianna.

-Yo no me he dado cuenta de nada -dijo, después de una corta pausa.

-Sí -continuó Kaloméitsev, pensativo-, por Pascua estaba un poco preocupado.

La señora Sipiaguin dirigió de nuevo la mirada hacia Marianna.

Kaloméitsev sonrió y entornó los ojos, dando a entender que comprendía.

-¡Marianna Vikéntievna! -exclamó él de golpe, con un tono de voz innecesariamente alto-. ¿Este año piensa dar de nuevo clases en la escuela?

Marianna respondió:

¿Y eso le interesa, Semión Petróvich?

-Sin duda, me interesa mucho.

-¿Prohibiría *eso?*

-A los nihilistas les prohibiría incluso pensar en escuelas. Pero con éstas en manos del clero... ¡incluso yo sería capaz de dirigir una!

-Mire, pues no sé qué haré este año. El año pasado fue todo tan mal. ¿Y cómo se puede organizar una escuela en verano?

Mientras hablaba, Marianna estaba muy colorada, como si le costara un gran esfuerzo continuar. Aún se sentía muy observada.

-¿No estás suficientemente preparada? -preguntó la señora Sipiaguin con ironía en la voz.

-Quizá no.

¿Cómo? exclamó de nuevo Kaloméitsev-. ¿Qué oigo? ¡Oh dioses! ¿Qué preparación se necesita para enseñar el abecé a las hijas de los campesinos?

En ese momento, Kolia entró en la sala a grandes voces: «¡Mamá, mamá! ¡Papá ya llega!», y detrás de él, bamboleándose en sus gruesas piernas, apareció una vieja de pelo blanco, sombrero y un chal amarillo, que también comunicó que había llegado Bórenka.

La vieja era Anna Zajárovna, una tía de Sipiaguin. Todos corrieron a la entrada, bajo la escalera y hacia los peldaños de la puerta principal. Una larga alameda de pequeños abetos corría directamente hacia la carretera y por ella rodaba un carruaje de cuatro caballos. Valentina Mijáilovna, de pie, delante de todos, agitaba un pañuelo. Kolia gritaba de satisfacción. El cochero detuvo calmosamente los caballos, que resollaban. Un criado bajó del asiento y casi arrancó la puerta del carruaje en su esfuerzo para abrirla. Y, con una sonrisa condescendiente en los labios, en los ojos, en todo el rostro, con un movimiento gracioso de hombros, dejando caer su capa, Boris Andréievich saltó al suelo. Valentina Mijáilovna le envolvió graciosamente el cuello con sus brazos y le besó tres veces. Kolia, pateando, tiraba de la chaqueta del padre... pero éste besó antes a Anna Zajárovna y, quitándose rápidamente el sombrero de cuadros, saludó a Marianna y Kaloméitsev, que habían llegado también a la puerta (Kaloméitsev le dio un fuerte *shakehands* inglés, «de badajo», como una campana tocando) y sólo entonces se volvió hacia el hijo. Le cogió, levantándole por debajo de los brazos y se lo acercó al rostro.

Comentario [Librodot-48]: Apretón de manos.

Durante toda esta escena, Nezhdánov había salido del carruaje inadvertidamente, como un culpable, y se había quedado junto a la puerta del carruaje, sin quitarse el sombrero y observando todo por debajo de las cejas... Mientras había estado abrazando a su marido, Valentina Mijáilovna, había mirado penetrantemente por encima de su hombro a aquel nuevo personaje. Sipiaguin ya la había informado de que llevaba consigo un profesor.

Todo el grupo continuó cambiando abrazos y apretones de mano con el señor de la casa, mientras subían la escalera, donde se alineaban, a ambos lados, los principales criados. No le besaron la mano -esa costumbre «asiática» había sido abandonada hacía mucho- y sólo hicieron una reverencia respetuosa, pero Sipiaguin respondió más con las cejas y la nariz que con la cabeza.

Nezhdánov también siguió al grupo escalera arriba. Inmediatamente después de llegar al vestíbulo, Sipiaguin, que ya le había buscado con la mirada, le presentó a la mujer, a Anna Zajárovna y a Marianna, y dijo a Kolia:

-Es tu profesor. ¡Debes escucharle! ¡Estréchale la mano!

Kolia alargó tímidamente la mano a Nezhdánov, después le miró fijamente pero, como no encontró evidentemente allá nada de interesante, de nuevo se volvió hacia su «papá». Nezhdánov se sintió incómodo, como en el teatro. Llevaba una chaqueta vieja, bastante simple; su rostro y sus manos estaban cubiertos de polvo del viaje. Valentina Mijáilovna le dijo algo amablemente, pero él no comprendió y no contestó, sólo observó que ella era muy bella y abrazaba al marido con extraordinario afecto. No le gustó el pelo rizado y lleno de pomada de Kolia y, cuando miró a Kaloméitsev pensó: «¡Qué tipo tan lustroso!», y no prestó más atención a los otros. Sipiaguin giró la cabeza dos veces con un gesto majestuoso, como observando sus penates, una pose que sentaba muy bien a sus largas patillas y a su cuello

Librodot

corto. Después, con una voz alta y resonante, y algo ronca a causa del viaje, gritó a uno de los criados:

-¡Iván! Acompaña al señor profesor al cuarto verde y cuida de su equipaje -y explicó a Nezhdánov que podía ir a descansar un poco y arreglarse, pues la cena era servida a las cinco en punto. Nezhdánov hizo una reverencia y siguió a Iván al cuarto «verde», que estaba en el segundo piso.

Todos se fueron a la sala de visitas. Allí, una vez más se repitieron los saludos. Una vieja nodriza ciega apareció con una reverencia. Por consideración a sus años, Sipiaguin le dio la mano a besar y, pidiendo disculpas a Kaloméitsev, se retiró a su habitación acompañado de la esposa.

VII

L cuarto al que Nezhdánov fue conducido era espacioso y limpio, y tenía ventanas que daban al jardín. Estaban abiertas y una leve brisa agitaba las cortinas blancas, que revoloteaban como velas, y las dejaba caer de nuevo. Por el techo se deslizaban suave mente reflejos dorados; toda la habitación estaba llena de la humedad fresca de la primavera. Nezhdánov empezó por dispensar al criado. Después sacó sus cosas de la maleta, se lavó y se vistió. El viaje le había agotado completamente. La presencia constante, durante dos días, de un extraño con quien conversó mucho, le había arruinado los nervios; una cierta amargura, que no era tedio ni mal humor, se había acumulado misteriosamente dentro de su ser. Estaba furioso consigo mismo por su falta de coraje, pero el corazón le gemía.

Se acercó a la ventana y miró hacia el jardín. Era un parque a la manera antigua, con la tierra muy negra, como ya no se veían cerca de Moscú. Se encontraba en una gran colina que bajaba en cuatro partes separadas: Delante de la casa, a unos doscientos pasos, había un jardín con flores, paseos rectos de cascajo, grupos de acacias y lilas y bancales redondos. A la izquierda, pasada la puerta del establo, junto a la era, había un pomar densamente poblado de manzanos, perales, ciruelos, morales y madroños. Delante mismo de la casa se extendía una gran alameda, cuadrada, de tilos. A la derecha una avenida de chopos plateados se extendía ante la vista; a través de un grupo de sauces se avistaba un naranjal. Todo el parque estaba envuelto con sus primeras hojas verdes; aún no se oía el zumbido fuerte de los insectos de verano; las hojas tiernas susurraban, los pinzones cantaban por allí, dos tórtolas arrullaban en un árbol, se oía un cuco solitario mudando cada vez de lugar; desde lejos, más allá de la laguna de la fábrica, venía el ruido agudo de los grajos, así como el crujido de las ruedas de un sinnúmero de carros. Y, por encima de todo, flotaban soñadoramente leves nubes, esparciéndose como el pecho de un pájaro enorme y perezoso. Nezhdánov miró, escuchó, y sorbió el aire fresco a través de sus labios entreabiertos...

El desánimo casi le dejó y le dominó una gran serenidad.

Entretanto, abajo, en la habitación, hablaban de él. Sipiaguin contaba a su mujer cómo le había conocido y lo que le había dicho el Príncipe G., así como las conversaciones que habían mantenido durante el viaje.

-Un muchacho listo -repitió-, y educado. Es cierto que es un revolucionario, pero sabes bien que para mí eso no tiene importancia. Sea como fuere, esa gente tiene ambiciones. Y Kolia es demasiado pequeño para poder ser influido por esos disparates.

Valentina Mijáilovna escuchó al marido con afecto y al mismo tiempo con una sonrisa divertida, casi como si le estuviese contando una broma extraña y graciosa. Era muy agradable que su *seigneur et maitre*, un hombre tan respetable e importante, pudiera ser tan travieso, como si sólo tuviera veinte años. De pie delante del espejo, con una camisa blanca como la nieve y tirantes azules, Sipiaguin se cepillaba la cabeza a la manera inglesa, con dos cepillos, mientras Valentina Mijáilovna, encogiendo los pies bajo el pequeño diván turco donde estaba sentada, empezó a contarle cosas de la administración de la casa, de la fábrica de

Comentario [Librodot-49]: Amo y señor.

papel, que -¡ah!- no iba tan bien como se podía esperar, del cocinero, que había que cambiar, de la iglesia, cuyo estuco se había caído, de Marianna, de Kaloméitsev...

Entre marido y mujer había la más completa confianza y comprensión; ciertamente vivían en «amor y armonía», como se decía en los viejos tiempos; así, cuando Sipiaguin, después de arreglarse, pidió galantemente las manos de Valentina Mijáilovna, y ella se las alargó y vio, con orgullo y afecto, cómo él se las besaba una tras otra, el sentimiento que se expresaba en las caras de ambos era un sentimiento bello y auténtico, aunque en ella brillasen un par de ojos dignos de Rafael, y en él los ojos normales de un simple «funcionario».

A las cinco en punto, Nezhdánov bajó para la cena, que fue anunciada no con una campanilla sino con un gong chino. Todos estaban ya reunidos en el comedor.

Sipiaguin de nuevo le saludó desde detrás de su alta corbata y le mostró su plaza en la mesa, entre Anna Zajárovna y Kolia. Anna Zajárovna era una vieja solterona, hermana del padre de Sipiaguin; se desprendía de ella un olor de alcanfor, como de un vestido viejo, y tenía un aire nervioso y abatido. Hacía en la casa el papel de ama o aya de Kolia y de su rostro arrugado surgió una expresión de desagrado cuando Nezhdánov se sentó entre ella y su pupilo. Kolia miró hacia el lado, a su nuevo vecino, y vio en seguida que el profesor estaba confuso y no muy relajado: no levantaba la cabeza y casi no comía nada. Kolia quedó satisfecho pues temía que el profesor fuese severo y se enfadase. Valentina Mijáilovna miraba también a Nezhdánov.

«Parece un estudiante», pensaba ella, «y sin experiencia de la sociedad, pero tiene una cara interesante y el color del cabello es original, como el de aquellos apóstoles que los viejos maestros italianos siempre pintaban de rojo. Y tiene las manos finas.»

Realmente todos miraban a Nezhdánov, pero tuvieron pena de él y le dejaron en paz de momento. El se dio cuenta de ello y quedó satisfecho a la vez que furioso. Kaloméitsev y Sipiaguin llevaban el peso de la conversación. Hablaron del Consejo Rural, del gobernador, del impuesto de carreteras, de los campesinos que redimían las tierras, de conocidos comunes de Moscú y San Petersburgo, del instituto del señor Katkov que ahora estaba de moda, de la dificultad de encontrar personal, de multas y de daños causados por el ganado en los campos, incluso hablaron de Bismarck, de la guerra de 1866, y de Napoleón III, que Kaloméitsev apoyaba con todo entusiasmo. El joven chambelán exhibió las opiniones más retrógradas y llegó al punto, jugueteando, claro, de proponer un brindis que un conocido suyo hizo en una fiesta de su santo: «Bebo al único principio que reconozco: ¡el azote y Roederer!»

Valentina Mijáilovna frunció la frente y observó que aquella frase era *de trés mauvais goút*. Sipiaguin expresó, por el contrario, las opiniones más liberales; refutó delicadamente los argumentos de Kaloméitsev e incluso se mofó un poco de él.

-Su terror a la emancipación, mi querido Semión Petróvich -le dijo-, me recuerda una nota que nuestro muy respetado Alexéi Ivanych Tveritínov escribió en 1860 y que leía en todos los salones de San Petersburgo. Era particularmente notable una frase sobre el siervo liberado, que marcharía por la faz de la patria con una antorcha en la mano. Debería haber visto a nuestro querido Alexéi Ivánovich soplando con todas sus fuerzas y pestañeando sus ojos pequeños, cómo exclamaba con su boca de muchacho: ¡An-toorcha! ¡Vendrán de antorcha!» Bien, llegó la emancipación... ¿Dónde está ese mujik de antorcha?»

-Tveritínov -dijo Kaloméitsev, con simpatía-, estaba equivocado sólo con el mujik, pero hay otros.

A estas palabras, Nezhdánov, que hasta entonces apenas había advertido a Marianna, que estaba sentada un poco más adelante, cambió una mirada con ella y en seguida sintió que ambos, él y aquella muchacha solemne, tenían las mismas convicciones y el mismo pensamiento. Ella no le había producido ninguna impresión cuando Sipiaguin les había presentado; ¿por qué motivo, pues, cambiaba ahora una mirada precisamente con ella? Se preguntaba si no era triste estar allí sentado escuchando opiniones como aquellas y no protestar, y con su silencio dejar que los otros pensaran que él estaba de acuerdo. Nezhdánov miró de nuevo a Marianna y le pareció que en sus ojos encontraba la respuesta a su pregunta: «Espera un poco, aún no es el momento... no vale la pena... más tarde... hay tiempo...»

Se alegró de pensar que ella le comprendía. Continuó escuchando la conversación.

Comentario [Librodot-50]: El instituto Katkov abrió en 1868. Ver nota 6.

Comentario [Librodot-51]: Guerra de Rusia contra el emir de Bujará, por la que su territorio (actual RSS de Uzbekistán), fue anexionado.

Comentario [Librodot-52]: De muy mal gusto.

Comentario [Librodot-53]: Iványch y Ivánovich son dos formas del mismo patronímico.

Librodot

Valentina Mijáilovna apoyaba al marido y se mostraba aún más liberal, aún más radical que él. No comprendía, «decididamente no comprendía,» cómo un hombre joven y educado podía sostener ideas tan anticuadas.

-De todos modos -añadió-, estoy convencida de que dice estas cosas sólo como pretexto para discutir. ¿Qué le parece, Alexéi Dmítrich? -se dirigió con una sonrisa amable a Nezhdánov (que se admiró de que_ ella supiera su nombre y patronímico)-, sé que no comparte las opiniones de Semión Petróvich: Boris me habló de las conversaciones que tuvo con él durante el viaje.

Nezhdánov se ruborizó, se inclinó sobre el plato y murmuró cualquier cosa imperceptible: no porque fuera tímido, pero no estaba acostumbrado a conversar con personajes tan importantes. La señora Sipiaguin continuó sonriéndole; el marido bajó la cabeza aprobando... Entonces Kaloméitsev puso, sin prisa, el monóculo entre la órbita y la nariz y miró a aquel estudiante que se atrevía a no compartir sus «temores».

Bien, *de esa manera* era difícil turbar a Nezhdánov; por lo contrario, en seguida se enderezó y fijó la mirada en aquel funcionario de la alta sociedad y, tan instintivamente como había sentido en Marianna a una camarada, en Kaloméitsev sintió a un enemigo. Kaloméitsev tuvo el mismo sentimiento; se quitó el monóculo, se giró e intentó reír descuidadamente... pero no le salió bien. Sólo Anna Zajárovna, que le adoraba secretamente, estaba mentalmente de su lado y se puso aún más furiosa con el indeseable vecino que la separaba de Kolia.

Poco después la cena terminó. Todos fueron a la terraza a tomar café. Sipiaguin y Kaloméitsev encendieron un puro cada uno. Sipiaguin ofreció a Nezhdánov un regalia auténtico, pero éste lo rehusó.

-¡Ah, sí! -exclamó Sipiaguin-. Olvidé que sólo fuma de sus cigarillos.

-Un gusto curioso -observó Kaloméitsev entre dientes.

Nezhdánov por poco no reventó. «Conozco muy bien la diferencia entre un regalia y un cigarillo, pero no quiero depender de nadie», casi le saltó de la lengua. Pero se contuvo; puso esta segunda insolencia «a la cuenta» de su enemigo.

-¡Marianna! -llamó de golpe la señora Sipiaguin en voz alta-. No hagas cumplidos a causa del nuevo amigo... fuma tu cigarillo tranquilamente. Tanto más -añadió ella, dirigiéndose a Nezhdánov-, que, según parece, entre los vuestros todas las señoras fuman.

-E... exactamente -respondió Nezhdánov con sequedad. Fue la primera palabra que dirigió a la señora Sipiaguin.

-Yo no fumo -continuó ella, entornando con galantería sus ojos de terciopelo-. Estoy anticuada.

Como para irritar a la tía, Marianna cogió, lenta y cuidadosamente, un cigarillo y una pequeña caja de cerillas y empezó a fumar. Nezhdánov también empezó a fumar, después de pedir lumbre a Marianna.

La tarde era magnífica. Kolia y Anna Zajárovna fueron hacia el jardín; los demás se quedaron aún casi una hora en la terraza para disfrutar del fresco. La conversación estaba muy animada... Kaloméitsev condenaba la literatura; Sipiaguin se mostró liberal, insistió en la libertad e independencia de la literatura, señaló su utilidad, incluso indicó el ejemplo de Chateaubriand, a quien el Emperador Alexéi Pávlovich había otorgado la orden de San Andrés. Nezhdánov no tomó parte en la discusión; Sipiaguin le observaba con una expresión de aprobación por su modestia y, por otro lado, con sorpresa.

Después pasaron a la sala de visitas para tomar el té.

-Aquí en casa, Alexéi Dmítrich -dijo Sipiaguin a Nezhdánov-, hay el mal hábito de jugar a las cartas e incluso jugamos a un juego prohibido, la *stukolka...* No insisto en que tome parte... pero quizá Marianna quiera tocarnos algo al piano. Espero que le guste la música. Y, sin esperar respuesta, Sipiaguin cogió una baraja de naipes. Marianna se sentó al piano y tocó, ni bien ni mal, algunas «romanzas sin palabras» de Mendelssohn.

-*Charmant! Charmant! Quel touché!* -gritaba de vez en cuando Kaloméitsev, pero la exclamación era sólo fruto de la delicadeza. A Nezhdánov, en contra de la esperanza

Comentario [Librodot-54]: ¡Encantador! ¡Encantador! ¡Qué toque!

manifestada por Sipiaguin, no le gustaba la música.

Mientras, Sipiaguin y su esposa, Kaloméitsev y Anna Zajárovna, se sentaron para jugar a cartas... Kolia vino a despedirse y, habiendo recibido la bendición de los padres y un gran vaso de leche con té, se fue a la cama; el padre le llamó aún para decirle que mañana empezarían sus clases con Alexéi Dmítrich. Poco después, al ver que Nezhdánov estaba desocupado por la sala y hojeaba sin interés los álbumes fotográficos, Sipiaguin le dijo que no hiciera cumplidos y se fuese a descansar, pues seguro que estaba fatigado del viaje y que en su casa la principal divisa era la libertad.

Nezhdánov aprovechó esta oportunidad y, haciendo una reverencia a todos, salió. En la puerta, topó con Marianna y, mirándola de nuevo a los ojos, quedó convencido de que serían camaradas, aunque ella no sólo no le hubiese sonreído sino que incluso le frunció la frente.

Fue a su habitación, que estaba rebosante de una suave frescura: la ventana había estado abierta todo el día. En el jardín de delante, un ruiseñor hacía oír su trino alto y suave; en el cielo nocturno, nublado y caliente, la luna brillaba sobre la copa redonda de los tilos. Nezhdánov encendió una vela; una mariposa nocturna gris vino del jardín oscuro directamente hacia la llama, voló a su alrededor, mientras la brisa soplaba y agitaba la llama azulamarillenta.

-¡Es extraño! -pensó Nezhdánov, ya en la cama-. Esta gente... parecen buenas personas, liberales, incluso humanos... pero estoy tan confuso. El chambelán... Bien, la mañana es más sensata que la noche... Sentimentalismos no sirven.

Pero en ese momento, fuera, el guardia de la finca golpeó con fuerza su bastón y gritó:

-Estoy... ¡aquí!

-¡Atención! -le respondió otra voz triste.

-¡Ah, Dios mío! ¡Es como estar en una cárcel!

VIII

NZHDÁNOV se despertó temprano y, sin esperar a que el criado apareciera, se vistió y se fue al gran jardín, bello y bien cuidado. Algunos jornaleros rastrillaban los paseos; por entre los arbustos verdes se veían los pañuelos rojos en las cabezas de las muchachas campesinas con rastrillos. Nezhdánov fue hasta el lago: la niebla matinal ya se había levantado, sólo algunas curvas de sus márgenes aún estaban ocultas. El sol, todavía bajo, lanzaba una luz rosada sobre el metálico sedoso de su gran superficie. Cinco carpinteros estaban ocupados con la balsa; un barco pintado hacía poco se balanceaba de un lado a otro, creando una leve ondulación en el agua. Las voces de los hombres sonaban poco y con un tono preocupado; todo estaba inmerso en la calma de la mañana, y todos estaban ocupados con el trabajo matinal, todo daba una sensación de orden y regularidad en la vida cotidiana. Y de golpe, en el otro extremo de la alameda, avistó a la encarnación misma del orden y la regularidad: Sipiaguin, que se acercaba.

Llevaba una chaqueta marrón, como si fuera una bata, y un sombrero de cuadros; se apoyaba en un bastón inglés de bambú, y su rostro acabado de afeitar respiraba satisfacción; inspeccionaba su propiedad. Sipiaguin saludó amablemente a Nezhdánov.

-¡Ah! exclamó-. ¡Veo que es un joven madrugador! -evidentemente con eso quería no tanto expresar con un tópico su aprobación, sino destacar el hecho de que Nezhdánov, como él mismo, no se quedaba mucho tiempo en la cama-. A las ocho todos tomamos té en el comedor y a las doce almorzamos. A las diez dará su primera clase de ruso a Kolia y a a las dos la de historia. Mañana, 9 de mayo, es el día de su nombre y no habrá clases, pero me gustaría que empezaran hoy.

Comentario [Librodot-55]: Equivalente al día del santo.

Nezhdánov bajó la cabeza y Sipiaguin se despidió a la manera francesa, esto es, levantando varias veces muy deprisa la mano hacia los labios y a la nariz, y siguió su camino silbando y agitando el bastón enérgicamente, no como un funcionario o un dignatario

importante sino como un buen *country gentleman* ruso.

Comentario [Librodot-56]: Caballero rural.

Nezhdánov estuvo en el jardín hasta las ocho, disfrutando de la sombra de los viejos árboles, del aire fresco, del canto de los pájaros. El sonido del gong le llamó y fue a encontrarse con todos en el comedor. Valentina Mijáilovna le saludó amistosamente. En su vestido matinal, le pareció verdaderamente bella. El rostro de Marianna tenía su habitual expresión seria y severa. A las diez en punto empezó la primera clase en presencia de Valentina Mijáilovna, que preguntó antes a Nezhdánov si le molestaba y se quedó todo el tiempo sentada y quieta. Kolia era un chico inteligente; después de los inevitables primeros momentos de incertidumbre e incomodidad, la clase fue muy bien. Valentina Mijáilovna quedó claramente satisfecha con Nezhdánov y se dirigió a él varias veces con simpatía. Él resistió... aunque no demasiado. Valentina Mijáilovna estuvo presente también en la segunda clase, la de historia de Rusia. Explicó, con una sonrisa, que en este tema le hacia falta instrucción no menos que a Kolia, y estuvo igualmente quieta y callada como durante la primera clase. Entre las tres y las cinco, Nezhdánov se quedó en su habitación escribiendo cartas y sintiéndose... exactamente ni aburrido ni desesperado; sus nervios cansados se habían tranquilizado un poco. A la hora de la cena, estuvieron otra vez tensos, aunque Kaloméitsev no había aparecido y la actitud delicada de los señores de la casa no había cambiado; pero esa misma atención puso a Nezhdánov furioso. Para empeorar las cosas, su vecina, la vieja solterona Anna Zajárovna, estaba claramente enfadada, Marianna seguía muy seria y el mismo Kolia ya le daba puntapiés sin cumplidos bajo la mesa. Sipiaguin también parecia indispuesto. Estaba muy descontento con el administrador de la fábrica de papel, un alemán, que, sin embargo, cobraba un gran sueldo. Empezó por insultar a todos los alemanes en general, después anunció que era en cierta manera un eslavófilo, aunque no fanático, y se refirió a un joven ruso que, según se decía, dirigía de una manera excelente una fábrica perteneciente a un comerciante de la vecindad; tenía muchas ganas de conocer a ese Solomin. Por la noche apareció Kaloméitsev. Su propiedad estaba sólo a diez verstas de «Arzhánov», el pueblo de Sipiaguin. Apareció también un cierto juez de paz, un mayorazgo, del tipo tan admirablemente descrito por Lérmontov en sus conocidos versos:

Todo escondido tras la corbata, frac hasta los pies...

Bigote, voz temblorosa -y mirada triste.

Llegó otro vecino con aire abatido, desdentado, pero impecablemente vestido; llegó el médico comarcal, un pésimo médico pero a quien le gustaba exhibirse con palabras difíciles: afirmaba, por ejemplo, que prefería a Kúkolnik antes que a Púshkin porque Kúkolnik tenía mucho «protoplasma». Se sentaron a jugar a las cartas. Nezhdánov se retiró a su habitación y estuvo leyendo y escribiendo hasta la media noche.

Comentario [Librodot-57]: Nestor Vaslievich Kúkolnik (18091868), poeta, prosador y dramaturgo, autor de tragedias conservadoras y patrióticas.

El día siguiente, 9 de marzo, era el día del santo de Kolia. Tres carruajes descubiertos, con lacayos detrás, llevaron los «señores» a la misa, aunque la iglesia no estuviera a más de un cuarto de versta. Todo tenía un aire muy alegre y festivo. Sipiaguin se acicaló a su manera; Valentina Mijáilovna se puso un bello vestido parisiense lila pálido y, en la iglesia, durante la misa, usó un pequeño breviario forrado de terciopelo escarlata. Dicho breviario preocupó mucho a algunas campesinas viejas, una de las cuales no consiguió contenerse y preguntó a su vecino: «Válganos Dios, ¿no estará haciendo un exorcismo?» El aroma de las flores, que llenaba toda la iglesia, se mezclaba con el olor fuerte de las chaquetas, botas alquitranadas y zapatos de los campesinos y, por encima de todo ello, el delicioso y dominante perfume del incienso. En el coro, los sacristanes intentaban cantar lo mejor posible. Con la ayuda de los obreros de la fábrica, intentaban cantar como en un concierto. Hubo un momento en que una sensación casi dolorosa cayó sobre todos. La voz del tenor (pertenecía a un obrero de la fábrica llamado Klima, que estaba en las últimas fases de la tuberculosis) se destacó sola, sin el mínimo apoyo en los tonos cromáticos menores y bemoles. Aquellos sonidos eran terribles, pero interrumpirlos sería destruir todo el concierto. Sin embargo... nada... sucedió. El reverendo Kiprián, un sacerdote con un aire extremadamente patriarcal, con todas las vestiduras

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eclesiásticas, leyó su sermón de un cuaderno; desgraciadamente, el concienzudo padre consideró necesario introducir los nombres de diversos reyes asirios muy sabios, que le causaron dificultades de pronunciación, y, aunque mostrase alguna erudición, sudó mucho con el esfuerzo. Nezhdánov, que hacía mucho tiempo que no entraba en una iglesia, se quedó de pie, en un rincón, entre las campesinas que le miraban de refilón mientras hacían la señal de la cruz, curvándose piadosamente hasta el suelo y limpiando la nariz de sus hijos; pero las muchachas campesinas, con chaquetas nuevas y velos bordados con abalorios, así como los muchachos, con sus camisas bordadas y chalecos, miraban atentamente al nuevo feligrés, volviendo la cara directamente hacia él. Y Nezhdánov, mientras les miraba, pensaba en las cosas más diversas.

Después de la misa, que duró mucho -la ceremonia de San Nicolás Milagrero, como se sabe, es la más larga de todas las ceremonias de la Iglesia Ortodoxa-, todo el clero, a invitación de Sipiaguin, fue a su casa y, después de varias ceremonias adicionales, como asperjar la sala con agua bendita, tomaron un abundante desayuno, durante el cual hubo las habituales congratulaciones y conversaciones algo fatigantes. Los señores de la casa -aunque a esa hora nunca desayunaban- ese día hicieron una excepción. Sipiaguin incluso contó un chiste, absolutamente decoroso pero divertido, a pesar de su cinta roja y de su dignidad, llenando al reverendo Kiprián de gratitud y asombro. Por «venganza», para mostrar que también él era capaz de explicar una cosa agradable en aquella ocasión, al reverendo Kiprián refirió una conversa suya con el «obispo», cuando éste, en un viaje por la diócesis, visitó a todo el clero de la comarca y fue a verle a la ciudad, en el monasterio.

-Es muy severo hacia nosotros -aseguró el reverendo Kiprián-. Primero nos interrogó sobre la parroquia, después, como hace habitualmente, empezó a examinarnos. Se dirigió también a mí: «¿Qué fiesta es la de tu iglesia?» «La Transfiguración del Señor», digo yo. «¿Sabes el himno de ese día?» «¡Como podría no saberlo!» «¡Entonces cántalo!» Y yo empiezo: «Transfigurado fuiste en la montaña, Cristo nuestro señor...» «¡Basta! ¿Qué es la Transfiguración y cuál es su significado?» «En pocas palabras», digo yo. «Cristo quiso mostrarse a sus discípulos en toda su gloria.» «¡Muy bien!», dijo él. «Aquí tienes una pequeña imagen para que te acuerdes de mí.» Yo caía sus pies. «¡Muy agradecido a Vuestra Excelencia Reverendísima!...» De este modo, no salí con las manos vacías.

-Yo tengo el honor de conocer a su Excelencia Reverendísima personalmente -observó Sipiaguin-. ¡Un pastor muy digno!

-¡Muy digno! -concordó el reverendo Kiprián-. Pero confía demasiado en el superintendente eclesiástico...

Valentina Mijáilovna se refirió a la escuela para los campesinos y habló de Marianna como la futura profesora. El diácono (que había sido nombrado supervisor de la escuela) -un hombre de constitución atlética y pelo largo y rizado que recordaba un poco la cola bien arreglada de un caballo de carreras Orlóv- quiso expresar su aprobación pero, olvidándose de su voz, gritó tan alto que él mismo quedó confuso y asustó a los demás. Poco después, los padres se retiraron.

Con su nueva chaqueta de botones dorados, Kolia fue el héroe del día: le hicieron regalos, le felicitaron, le besaron la mano en la puerta principal y en la puerta trasera los obreros, los criados de la casa, las viejas y las muchachas. Los mujiks, en memoria de los viejos tiempos, se reunieron delante de la casa alrededor de algunas mesas repletas de grandes empanadas y botellas de vodka. Kolia estaba avergonzado y alegre y orgulloso y tímido y tierno hacia sus padres y, corrió a esconderse. En la cena, Sipiaguin hizo servir champán y, antes de beber a la salud del hijo, hizo un discurso. Habló del significado de «servir la tierra», y de que por ese camino desearía que su Nikolái siguiera (fue precisamente así como se refirió a él), y de los deberes que de él esperaba:

-En primer lugar, la familia; en segundo lugar, su clase, la sociedad; en tercer lugar, el pueblo; sí, queridos señores, el pueblo... y, en cuarto lugar, ¡el gobierno!

Poco a poco, Sipiaguin fue volviéndose más elocuente, con una mano bajo los faldones de la casaca imitando a Robert Peel. Pronunció la palabra «ciencia» con emoción y terminó su

Comentario [Librodot-58]: Estadista inglés (17881850), promotor de la política conservadora moderada destinada a asegurar su permanencia en el poder en un contexto de cambios sociales profundos.

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discurso con una exclamación latina: *Laboremus!,* que en seguida tradujo al ruso. Con la copa en la mano, Kolia salió de su lugar para agradecer a su padre y ser besado por todos.

Comentario [Librodot-59]: ¡Trabajemos!

Nezhdánov de nuevo cambió miradas con Marianna. Ambos, sin duda, sentían lo mismo. Pero no se hablaron.

De todas formas, todo lo que Nezhdánov veía le parecía más divertido que molesto y desagradable, y la amable anfitriona, Valentina Mijáilovna, le parecía una mujer inteligente, que sabía que representaba un papel, y al mismo tiempo se sentía secretamente contenta porque había otra persona también inteligente que la comprendía... Nezhdánov sin duda no sospechaba hasta qué punto su orgullo estaba siendo alabado por su actitud hacia él.

Al día siguiente continuaron las clases y la vida retomó su ritmo normal.

La primera semana pasó sin darse cuenta... De lo que Nezhdánov pensó y sintió es mejor dar razón a través de una carta que escribió a un tal Silin, un viejo camarada de instituto y su mejor amigo. Este Silin no vivía en San Petersburgo sino en una ciudad distante, de provincia, a expensas de un pariente viejo, de quien dependía totalmente. Su posición era tal que no podía jamás soñar en liberarse. Era un hombre de salud muy delicada, tímido y de poco talento, pero de corazón notablemente puro. No se interesaba por la política, pero leía todos los libros que le caían en las manos, tocaba la flauta para no aburrirse y tenía miedo de las chicas. Silin era un gran amigo de Nezhdánov; tenía un carácter, por lo general, muy afectuoso. Nezhdánov no se expresaba tan libremente con nadie como con Vladímir Silin; cuando le escribía, tenía siempre la sensación de que se estaba comunicando con un ser muy querido e íntimo, pero que vivía en otro mundo o en su propia conciencia. Nezhdánov no podía siquiera imaginarse la posibilidad de vivir de nuevo con Silin como camaradas en la misma ciudad. Probablemente perdería el interés por él, pues había muy poco de común entre ellos, pero le escribía largas cartas con absoluta confianza. Con otros -por lo menos en el papel- todo era falso e hipócrita; con Silin ¡nunca! Utilizando mal la pluma, respondía siempre con pocas frases, cortas, torpes, pero Nezhdánov no necesitaba respuestas largas; sabía que el amigo devoraba cada palabra de sus cartas como el polvo de la carretera sorbe cada gota de lluvia, que guardaba sus secretos como algo sagrado, y que, en su desesperada soledad, no vivía más que su vida. Nezhdánov no había hablado absolutamente a nadie de sus tan queridas relaciones con Silin.

«Bien, mi caro, mi puro Vladímir», le escribió. Siempre le llamaba puro, y con motivo. «Felicítame. Caí en las verdes pasturas y ahora puedo reposar y recuperar las fuerzas. Vivo en casa de un funcionario muy rico, Sipiaguin, doy clases a su hijo, como magníficamente (¡nunca en mi vida he comido tan bien!), duermo bien, paseo por el bello campo; pero sobre todo salí por algún tiempo de la tutoría de los amigos de San Petersburgo. Al principio fue horriblemente aburrido, pero ahora me siento mejor. Pronto tendré que volver a la tarea que ya conoces, o sea, trepar al cesto, como yo lo llamo (por eso me permitieron que viniera): pero entretanto puedo disfrutar de las delicias de la vida animal, echar tripa, e incluso escribir versos, si tengo disposición para ello. Dejo mis observaciones para otra altura: la propiedad me parece bien administrada, pero creo que la fábrica está muy en decadencia. En el sector de redención de tierras, los mujiks son un poco inaccesibles, los criados asalariados tienen todos expresiones muy serviles. Pero hablaremos de eso en otra ocasión. Los señores de la casa son delicados y liberales; él es muy condescendiente y, de vez en cuando, se lanza en torrentes de elocuencia. Un reformista. Su mujer es la imagen de la belleza y es muy, supongo, inteligente; me vigila mucho, ¡y ¡es tan suave! ¡Parece que no tenga un solo hueso en el cuerpo! Le tengo un poco de miedo; ¡sabes bien como soy con las mujeres! Hay vecinos, pero horribles. Hay una vieja que me detesta... Aunque estoy interesado sobre todo en una muchacha, pero ¡si es pariente o compañera sólo Dios lo sabe! Casi no he cambiado dos palabras con ella, pero siento que somos de la misma raza...»

Aquí se seguía una descripción de Marianna, de todas sus costumbres, y después proseguía:

«De que es infeliz, orgullosa, ambiciosa, reservada, pero sobre todo infeliz, no tengo la menor duda. La razón por la que es infeliz es algo que todavía no conozco. Que tiene una

naturaleza íntegra es evidente; haría falta saber si es o no bondadosa. ¿Habrá mujeres bondadosas que no sean estúpidas? Y la bondad, ¿será necesaria? Sin embargo, poco sé sobre las mujeres en general. La señora de la casa no la quiere... Y ella le paga con la misma moneda... Pero no se sabe cuál de ellas tiene razón. Yo creo que es la señora de la casa quien no debe de tener razón... porque es muy delicada con ella; pero las cejas *de ella* se fruncen nerviosamente cuando habla a su señora. Sí, es una persona muy nerviosa. Y se *ofende* tan fácilmente como yo... aunque probablemente no de la misma manera.

»Cuando todo esto se aclare un poco te lo contaré...

»Ella casi no habla conmigo, como ya te he dicho; pero en las pocas palabras que me dirigió (siempre súbita e inesperadamente), había un tono de sinceridad... que me agradó...

»A propósito, ese pariente tuyo ¿te sigue fastidiando la existencia y no se decide a morir?

»¿Leiste en "El heraldo de Europa" un artículo sobre los últimos impostores de Oremburg? Fue en el 1834 cuando eso pasó, hermano. No me gusta esta revista y, si bien el autor del artículo es conservador, la cosa es interesante y puede provocar ideas...»

Comentario [Librodot-60]: «Véstnik Evropy».

Comentario [Librodot-61]: Se refiere a un artículo de N. A. Sereda en el número de abril de 1868 del «Véstnik Evropy [«El heraldo de Europa»] con el título *Los últimos disturbios en el distrito de Orenburgo,* en el cual se refiere a una insurrección de campesinos del Estado levantados por falsos rumores de que serían pasados a la servidumbre. Los disturbios ocurrieron en 1843 (y no 1834 como dice Turguénev) y la servidumbre sólo fue abolida en 1861. En el artículo no se habla de impostores como Pugachóv que en 1773 se presentó a los campesinos como si fuera el zar y los levantó en revuelta. Turguénev cambió intencionalmente el título de ese artículo para dar a Nezhdánov ocasión de aludir a una de las tácticas de los populistas, los cuales pensaban que la aparición de un nuevo zar impostor podría cambiar el orden social de Rusia con algunos decretos.

IX

MAYO había llegado ya a la segunda mitad. Con él vinieron las primeras tardes calientes del verano. Un día, después de terminar la clase de historia, Nezhdánov se dirigió al jardín y de allí fue hacia un bosque de abedules, que había algo más lejos. Parte de ese bosque había sido cortado hacía cerca de quince años, pero todo el lugar ya había sido poblado con nuevos árboles. Los troncos blandos y plateados, y las hojas verdes, brillantes, centelleaban como si acabaran de ser lavadas y bruñidas; la hierba primaveral brotaba en lenguas afiladas a través de las pesadas hojas caídas en los últimos años. Todo el bosque era cortado por veredas estrechas; pájaros negros de pico amarillo soltaban gritos súbitos, como asustados, volando por esas veredas, bajo, cerca del suelo, y se lanzaban a lo más denso de la mata a gran velocidad. Después de haber paseado una media hora, Nezhdánov se sentó en un tronco de árbol cercado de leños grises y viejos: estaban en montones, como cuando cayeron cortados por el hacha. Muchas veces habían sido cubiertos por la nieve en invierno y liberados por la primavera, y nadie los tocaba. Nezhdánov se apoyó en una sólida pared de abedules jóvenes, de sombra pesada pero pequeña. No pensaba en nada en concreto, pero se había entregado a las particulares sensaciones de la primavera que, en el corazón de jóvenes y viejos por igual, siempre vienen mezcladas con una cierta tristeza... una tristeza agitada de espera en los jóvenes; una tristeza pesada e infeliz en los viejos...

De golpe Nezhdánov oyó el ruido de pasos que se acercaban.

No eran pasos de una sola persona, ni de botas pesadas de mujiks o de pies descalzos de campesinas. Parecía que dos personas caminaban lentamente... Se oía el arrastrar de un vestido de mujer...

Y sonó una voz honda, una voz de hombre:

-¿Es pues su última palabra? ¿Nunca?

-¡Nunca! -repitió la otra voz, la de mujer, que a Nezhdánov le resultó familiar. Y un momento después, de una curva del camino, oculta en ese lugar por un pequeño abedul, apareció Marianna acompañada de un hombre moreno, de ojos negros, que Nezhdánov nunca había visto hasta entonces.

Ambos se detuvieron como petrificados al avistar a Nezhdánov; y éste quedó tan sorprendido que ni siquiera se levantó del tronco donde estaba sentado... Marianna se ruborizó hasta la raíz de los cabellos, pero en seguida tuvo una sonrisa desdeñosa... ¿A quien se dirigía esa sonrisa? ¿A sí misma por haberse ruborizado, o a Nezhdánov...? Su compañero frunció las cejas gruesas y un brillo inquietante centelleó en el blanco amarillento de los ojos. Después

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cambió una mirada con Marianna, y ambos volvieron la espalda y se apartaron sin apresurar el paso, mientras él los seguía con la mirada atónita.

Media hora después, Nezhdánov volvió a la casa y se metió en su habitación. Cuando, al sonido del gong, entró en la sala de visitas, encontró allí al mismo desconocido de ojos negros que había visto en el bosque. Sipiaguin se lo presentó como *su beau frére*, hermano de Valentina Mijáilovna: Serguéi Mijáilovich Markélov.

-¡Espero que sean amigos, caballeros! -exclamó Sipiaguin con su tan característica sonrisa majestuosa y amable, al mismo tiempo que distraída.

Markélov hizo una reverencia en silencio; Nezhdánov respondió del mismo modo... Y Sipiaguin, lanzando ligeramente hacia atrás su cabeza pequeña y encogiéndose de hombros, se alejó. «Yo les presenté, pero que sean amigos o no, me es totalmente indiferente.»

Entonces Valentina Mijáilovna se acercó a los dos hombres, que estaban juntos en silencio, y de nuevo hizo las presentaciones, mirando a su hermano con aquella expresión particular, tierna y brillante, que parecía anular la voluntad con sus maravillosos ojos.

¿Qué es eso, *cher Serge?* ¡Nos olvidaste completamente! No viniste ni para el día del santo de Kolia. ¿Tan ocupado estás? Está haciendo algún nuevo arreglo con sus campesinos -dijo ella dirigiéndose a Nezhdánov-. Muy original: para ellos van tres cuartas partes de todo... y para él un cuarto; y aún dice que se queda con una parte demasiado grande.

-A mi hermana le gusta mucho bromear -dijo Markélov a su vez a Nezhdánov-. Pero estoy dispuesto a convenir con ella que el hecho de que *un* solo hombre se pueda quedar con la cuarta parte de lo que pertenence a *cien* es realmente mucho.

-¿Cree realmente que me gusta bromear, Alexéi Dmítrievich? -preguntó la señora Sipiaguin con la misma ternura suave en la mirada y en la voz.

Nezhdánov no sabía qué responder; pero precisamente en este momento anunciaron la llegada de Kaloméitsev. La señora de la casa fue a recibirle y, algunos minutos después, una criada anunció que la cena estaba servida.

En la mesa, Nezhdánov observaba involuntariamente a Marianna y a Markélov. Estaban sentados juntos, ambos con los ojos bajos, los labios apretados y una expresión de seriedad triste, casi amarga. Nezhdánov estaba sorprendido, sobre todo de que Markélov fuera hermano de la señora Sipiaguin. Eran tan poco parecidos. De hecho sólo tenían una semejanza: que ambos eran morenos. Pero en Valentina Mijáilovna el color uniforme del rostro, las manos y los hombros constituía uno de sus principales atractivos... y en el hermano llegaba a aquel punto de moreno al que las personas educadas llaman bronce, pero que a los ojos de los rusos recuerda al cuero. Markélov tenía el pelo rizado, la nariz un poco aguileña, los labios gruesos, las mejillas hondas, el pecho estrecho y las manos fuertes. Todo en él era fuerte, seco, y hablaba con una voz metálica, corta, dura. Su mirada soñolienta, su expresión triste, eran propias de un bilioso. Comió poco, se divirtió haciendo pelotas de miga de pan y, de vez en cuando, fijaba los ojos en Kaloméitsev, que acababa de volver de la ciudad, donde había ido a hablar con el gobernador sobre un asunto nada agradable para él del cual, sin embargo, guardaba el mayor silencio mientras que de otras cosas hablaba mucho.

Sipiaguin, como era habitual, le atacó cuando él empezó a exagerar, rió mucho con sus chistes *y bonmots,* aunque considerase *qu'il est un affreux réactionaire*. Entre otras cosas, Kaloméitsev aseguró que había quedado verdaderamente en éxtasis ante aquello de que los mujiks *-mi, oui! les simples mougiks*- llamaran a los abogados.

-¡Mentirosos! ¡Mentirosos! -repitió él, deleitado-. *Ce peuple russe est délicieux!*

Después explicó cómo, un día que fue a la escuela del pueblo, preguntó a uno de los alumnos qué era un strofokamil. Y a lo que nadie supo responder, ni el mismo maestro -él, Kaloméitsev, hizo otra pregunta: «¿Qué es un piteco?» y citó incluso un verso de Jemnitser: *«Y el piteco imbécil, que imita a los otros animales!»* Pues bien, tampoco nadie le respondió.

-¡Esto son vuestras escuelas populares!

-Pero, perdón -observó Valentina Mijáilovna-, ¡yo misma no sé qué clase de animales son esos!

Comentario [Librodot-62]: Cuñado.

Comentario [Librodot-63]: Querido Serguéi.

Comentario [Librodot-64]: Bromas.

Comentario [Librodot-65]: Que él es un reaccionario asqueroso.

Comentario [Librodot-66]: ¡Sí, sí! ¡Los simples mujiks!

Comentario [Librodot-67]: ¡Este pueblo ruso es delicioso!

Comentario [Librodot-68]: Avestruz (en griego).

Comentario [Librodot-69]: *I pífik slaboum, spisatel' zverskij lits/* Según investigaciones hechas en la URSS, este verso no se encuentra en las obras de Jemnitser.

Librodot

-¡Señora mía! -exclamó Kaloméitsev-. ¡Una señora no tiene necesidad de saber estas cosas!

-Entonces, ¿por qué necesita el pueblo saberlo?

-¡Porque vale más saber lo que es un piteco o un strofokamil que saber quien es un Proudhon o un Adam Smith cualquiera!

Pero aquí de nuevo Sipiaguin interrumpió a Kaloméitsev para explicar que Adam Smith era una de las luces del pensamiento humano y que seria bueno embeber de sus principios (en este momento, llenó su vaso de vino)... la leche (se llevó el vaso a la nariz y lo olió)... materna. Vació el vaso. Kaloméitsev bebió también y alabó el vino.

Markélov no dio atención especial a la conversación del chambelán de San Petersburgo, pero miró una o dos veces interrogativamente a Nezhdánov y, disparando sus pelotillas de pan, por poco no acertó directamente en la nariz del elocuente huésped...

Sipiaguin dejó al cuñado tranquilo; Valentina Mijáilovna tampoco le habló; era evidente que ambos consideraban a Markélov un excéntrico a quien era preferible no provocar.

Después de la cena, Markélov se dirigió a la sala de los billares para fumar su pipa, pero Nezhdánov se retiró a su habitación. En el pasillo encontró a Marianna. Quería seguir... pero ella le hizo parar con un movimiento rápido de la mano.

-Señor Nezhdánov -le dijo con una voz un poco temblorosa-, debería serme indiferente lo que pueda pensar de mí, pero a pesar de todo... me parece... -no encontraba la palabra- ...me parece necesario decirle que cuando me encontró hoy en el bosque con el señor Markélov... Seguramente pensó, al vernos tan confusos, que fuimos allí citados.

-No me pareció absolutamente nada extraño... -empezó Nezhdánov.

-El señor Markélov -le interrumpió Marianna-, me hizo una declaración y le rechacé. Es todo lo que tenía para decirle. Adiós. Piense de mí lo que quiera.

Se volvió con brusquedad y atravesó apresuradamente el pasillo.

Nezhdánov entró en su habitación y se quedó sentado delante de la ventana meditando. «¡Qué muchacha tan extraña! ¿Y por qué esta salida tan abrupta, esta explicación no solicitada? ¿Será el deseo de ser original o simple afectación? ¿U orgullo? Lo más probable es que sea orgullo. No puede soportar mi sospecha... No tolera la idea de que otra persona pueda tener un concepto falso de ella. ¡Una muchacha muy extraña!»

Así meditaba Nezhdánov. Y abajo, en la terraza, se hablaba de él mientras él lo oía todo.

-Mi olfato me dice -aseguraba Kaloméitsev-, que es un rojo. Ya durante mi comisión especial en el gobierno civil de Moscú *avec Ladislas,* aprendí a conocer a estos caballeros... los rojos, así como los inconformistas. Creo mucho en el instinto.

Comentario [Librodot-70]: Con Ladislao.

Aquí Kaloméitsev contó "a propósito" cómo una vez, en los alrededores de Moscú, había cogido a un viejo inconformista, ante quien apareció inesperadamente con la policía y "que casi saltó por la ventana de la cabaña... Y hasta ese momento había estado tranquilamente sentado en su banco, ¡el vago!"

Kaloméitsev se olvidó de contar que ese viejo, una vez encarcelado, se negó a comer y murió de hambre.

-Y su nuevo profesor -continuó celosamente el chambelán- ¡es sin duda un rojo! ¿Se ha dado cuenta de que nunca es el primero en hacer una reverencia?

-¿Y por qué motivo debería ser el primero? -observó Sipiaguin-. A mí, por lo contrario, me gusta.

-Yo soy huésped en la casa donde él sirve -exclamó Kaloméitsev-, sí, sí, sirve, por dinero, *comme un salarié…* Por consiguiente, yo soy superior. Y él debe hacerme la reverencia primero.

Comentario [Librodot-71]: Como un asalariado.

-Usted es muy severo, querido amigo -dijo Sipiaguin, acentuando con fuerza la palabra *querido-.* Creía, perdóneme que sea tan sincero, que ya habíamos superado esas cosas. Yo he comprado sus servicios, su trabajo, pero él sigue siendo un hombre libre.

-No siente las riendas -continuó Kaloméitsev-, las riendas: *le frein!* Todos esos rojos son así. Soy yo quien se lo digo: ¡tengo buen olfato para olerlos! A este respecto sólo *Ladislas* puede compararse conmigo. Si este profesor me cayera en las manos, ¡ya le arreglaría! Hablaría de otra manera, y se quitaría el sombrero ante mí... que sería un encanto!

Librodot

-Cuentos, ¡fanfarrón! -casi gritó Nezhdánov desde arriba. Pero en ese momento la puerta de la habitación se abrió y, para sorpresa suya, entró Markélov.

X

NEZHDÁNOV se levantó para recibirle y Markélov, dirigiéndosele directamente, sin un saludo ni una sonrisa, le preguntó si él era Alexéi Dmítriev Nezhdánov, estudiante de la universidad de San Petersburgo.

-Sí... exactamente -respondió Nezhdánov. Markélov sacó del bolsillo una carta no lacrada.

-En ese caso... lea ésto. De Vasili Nikoláievich

-añadió, bajando significativamente la voz.

Nezhdánov la desplegó y la leyó. Era una circular semioficial, en la cual el portador, Serguéi Markélov, era recomendado como uno de los "nuestros", de absoluta confianza; seguían algunos consejos sobre la urgente necesidad de acción unida en la propaganda de sus conocidos principios. La circular iba dirigida a Nezhdánov, como persona de confianza.

Nezhdánov apretó la mano de Markélov, le pidió que se sentara y él también se sentó. Markélov encendió un cigarrillo en silencio. Nezhdánov siguió su ejemplo.

-¿Ha conseguido acercarse ya a los campesinos de aquí? -preguntó, finalmente, Markélov.

-No, aún no he tenido tiempo.

-¿Cuánto hace que está aquí?

-Hará dos semanas.

¿Tiene mucho trabajo?

-No mucho.

Markélov tosió con aire taciturno.

-¡Hm! El pueblo aquí es muy necio -continuó él-, estúpido. Tiene que ser ilustrado. Son muy pobres, pero es difícil hacerles comprender la causa de esa pobreza.

-Los antiguos siervos de su cuñado, por lo que he visto, no son muy pobres -observó Nezhdánov. -Mi cuñado es listo, un verdadero maestro paramistificar a los otros. Sus campesinos no están mal del todo, pero él tiene una fábrica. Es ahí donde tenemos que centrar la atención. Allí, basta un golpe y el hormiguero empieza en seguida a agitarse. ¿Tiene algunos libros consigo?

-Sí, algunos.

-Yo le conseguiré más. ¿Por qué tiene tan pocos? Nezhdánov no respondió. Markélov también quedó callado, sólo expelía humo por la nariz.

-¡Vaya granuja, ese Kaloméitsev! -exclamó, de repente-. Estuve toda la cena con ganas de saltar sobre ese barin y aplastar aquella cara insolente para que sirviera de aviso. Pero, ¡no! Ahora hay cosas más importantes que un chambelán. Ahora no es el momento de ponerse furioso con cretinos como éste, que sólo dicen tonterías; ahora es el momento de impedirles que hagan estupideces.

Comentario [Librodot-72]: En la Rusia prerrevolucionaria, persona perteneciente a las capas superiores de la sociedad, propietario de tierras pero no necesariamente con título nobiliario [femenino: bárinia; diminutivo fememino: bárishnia].

Nezhdánov movió la cabeza en señal de aprobación y Markélov empezó de nuevo a fumar.

-Entre todos los criados, sólo hay uno relativamente listo -continuó Markélov-. No es su Iván... ése es estúpido como un pez, sino otro... se llama Kiril, el que se ocupa de las bebidas este Kiril era conocido como un borracho inveterado-. Repare bien en él. Una cabeza loca... pero no podemos tener demasiadas manías. Y ¿qué dice de mi hermana? -preguntó, levantando la cabeza y fijando sus ojos amarillentos en Nezhdánov-. Aún es más embustera que mi cuñado. ¿Qué piensa de ella?

-Pienso que es una señora muy agradable y simpática... Y, además, muy bella.

-¡Hm! Con que finura ustedes, los de San Petersburgo, se expresan... ¡Es admirable!

Librodot

Bien... y de... -empezó pero de repente su rostro se cerró y no terminó la frase-. Veo que nos hace falta una gran charla -continuó-. Pero aquí no es posible. ¡Quién sabe! Pueden estar escuchando detrás de la puerta. ¿Sabe lo que sugiero? Hoy es sábado; mañana no da clases a mi sobrino, ¿verdad que no?

-Tengo un ensayo con él mañana a las tres.

-¡Un ensayo! Como en el teatro. Esa palabra debe haber sido inventada por mi hermana. Bien, no importa. Si quiere podemos ir ahora mismo a mi casa. Mi pueblo está a diez verstas de aquí. Tengo buenos caballos: en un abrir y cerrar de ojos está en mi casa, se queda hasta la mañana y a las tres estará de vuelta. ¿De acuerdo?

-Con mucho gusto -respondió Nezhdánov. Desde la entrada de Markélov se encontraba en un estado de gran excitación. Esa intimidad súbita le perturbaba y al mismo tiempo le atraía. Sentía, comprendía, que delante de él estaba un ser probablemente rudo, pero honesto y fuerte. Por otra parte, aquel extraño encuentro en el bosque, la inesperada explicación de Marianna...

-¡Magnífico! -exclamó Markélov-. Puede arreglarse mientras mando preparar el carruaje. Espero que no sea necesario pedir permiso a los señores de la casa...

-Debo informarles. No considero prudente salir sin decirles nada.

-Yo se lo diré -se ofreció Markélov-. No se preocupe. Están obsesionados con las cartas... y no se darán cuenta de su ausencia. Mi cuñado sólo se preocupa de la gente del gobierno y la única cosa que sabe hacer bien es jugar a las cartas. Bien, dicen que por este medio muchos triunfan... Así, pues, arréglese. Yo me ocupo de todo.

Markélov salió y una hora después Nezhdánov estaba sentado a su lado en el gran asiento de cuero de su enorme carruaje, muy viejo y muy confortable. El cochero, en el pescante, silbaba de una manera espantosamente agradable, como un pájaro; tres caballos rapados, con las colas y las crines negras entrenzadas, los llevaban rápidamente por la carretera lisa; y ya envueltos por las primeras sombras de la noche (eran exactamente las diez cuando se marcharon), pasaban rápidamente por su lado -unos lejos, otros más cerca- árboles, arbustos, campos, prados y despeñaderos.

El pequeño pueblo de Markélov (con cerca de doscientas desiatinas, que daban alrededor de setecientos rublos al año y que se llamaba Borziónkov) se encontraba a casi tres verstas de la capital provincial, de la que la propiedad de Sipiaguin estaba separada siete verstas. Para ir a Borziónkov era necesario atravesar la ciudad. Los nuevos amigos apenas tuvieron tiempo de cambiar _ medio centenar de palabras cuando descubrieron las pequeñas casas de los tenderos de los alrededores de la ciudad que pasaban por su lado, con sus tejados de madera, y pálidas manchas de luz saliendo de las estrechas ventanas cerradas. Después las ruedas empezaron a estallar sobre el puente de la ciudad, pavimentado de piedra, y el carruaje empezó a traquetear, balanceándose de un lado a otro... y, oscilando a cada traqueteo, pasó ante las estúpidas casas de piedra de dos pisos, con frontispicios, de los comerciantes, por la iglesia de columnas, por las tabernas... Casi era domingo; en las calles ya no había nadie, pero las tabernas estaban llenas. De ellas salían voces roncas, canciones de borrachos, sonidos hediondos de armonios; de vez en cuando se abría súbitamente una puerta, que dejaba salir el reflejo rojo de las luces y olor a basura y a alcohol. Delante de casi todas las tabernas había pequeñas carretas de campesinos, con unos caballos miserables, magros, de enormes vientres, cuyas cabezas pendían sumisamente como si estuvieran durmiendo; un mujik andrajoso y desabrido, con una enorme gorra de invierno cayéndole de la nuca como un saco, salía de una taberna e, inclinando el pecho en un varal, se quedó allí revolviendo desesperadamente alguna cosa con las manos; o un obrero esquelético de gorra ladeada, la camisa abierta y descalzo -habiéndose dejado las botas en la taberna- daba unos pasos indecisos, paraba, se rascaba la espalda, y, soltando una exclamación, volvía de nuevo a la taberna...

Comentario [Librodot-73]: Una desiatina es equivalente a 2,7 acres o sea aproximadamente una hectárea.

-¡El alcohol es la ruina del pueblo ruso! -observó Markélov, taciturno.

-¡Es por amargura, Serguéi Mijáilovich! -exclamó sin volverse, el cochero, que delante de cada taberna dejaba de silbar y se quedaba meditabundo.

-¡Vamos! ¡Vamos! -respondió Markélov tirándose vigorosamente del cuello del abrigo.

Librodot

El carruaje cruzó la gran plaza del mercado, que olía a col y a esteras, pasó delante de la casa del gobernador, con garitas coloreadas para los centinelas cerca de los portones, delante de una casa privada con torres, por el bulevar recientemente inaugurado y ya con los árboles muriéndose, por el bazar lleno de perros que ladraban y ruido de corrientes, y así hacia las puertas de la ciudad, donde atravesaron una larga fila de carros, cuyos cocheros aprovechaban el fresco de la noche para seguir el viaje, y otra vez se encontraron con el aire libre del campo, en la gran carretera flanqueada de sauces, y de nuevo rodaron rápida y suavemente.

Markélov -tenemos que decir algunas palabras sobre él- era seis años mayor que su hermana, la señora Sipiaguin. Se había educado en una escuela de artillería, de donde salió oficial, pero presentó su dimisión cuando llegó al grado de teniente, a causa de unas escenas desagradables ocurridas entre él y su ayudante, un alemán. Desde aquel momento, pasó a detestar a los alemanes, particularmente a los alemanes de Rusia.

Comentario [Librodot-74]: Los alemanes constituían una importante minoría dentro del Imperio Ruso. A inicios del siglo XX eran cerca de dos millones, a los que se deben añadir cerca de trescientos mil residentes más. Había también los alemanes del Volga, especialmente cerca de Odesa, Besa rabia y algunas regiones del Cáucaso. Entre los súbditos alemanes de Rusia había aún los alemanes del Báltico. Ocupaban cargos importantes en el funcionariado, la enseñanza y el ejército. Sólo a partir de 1880 una política antialemana empezó a hacer disminuir su influencia.

Aquella dimisión le ocasionó tener malas relaciones con su padre, que sólo volvió a ver en el momento de su muerte, después de la cual heredó un pequeño pueblo, donde se instaló. En San Petersburgo había convivido a menudo con personas inteligentes y progresistas, que casi veneraba y que acabaron por arrastrarle hacia sus ideas. Markélov no había leído mucho, pero sí libros sobre su causa, sobre todo los de Herzen. Conservaba sus hábitos militares, vivía como un espartano o un monje. Algunos años antes se había enamorado de una chica que le abandonó de la manera más ruda para casarse con un ayudante de campo, también alemán. Markélov empezó a odiar también a los ayudantes de campo. Intentó escribir una serie de artículos sobre los defectos de nuestra artillería, pero no tenía el más mínimo talento para exponer ideas por escrito y no llegó a terminar un solo artículo. Sin embargo continuó llenando grandes hojas de papel gris con su letra grande, torpe e infantil. Era un hombre obstinado y corajoso hasta el desespero, incapaz de perdonar y de olvidar, con una permanente sensación de los agravios que le infligían -a él y a todos los oprimidos-, y estaba dispuesto a todo. Su cerebro limitado se fijaba en un sólo punto: lo que no comprendía, no existía para él. Pero despreciaba y odiaba la falsedad y la mentira. Con las personas de la alta sociedad, los "reaccionarios", como él les llamaba, era severo e incluso rudo; con el pueblo era simple y trataba a los mujiks como hermanos. Administraba su propiedad bastante bien; le habían entrado en la cabeza varios planes socialistas, que era tan capaz de poner en práctica como de terminar los artículos sobre las deficiencias de la artillería. Generalmente no tenía suerte en nada: en su regimiento era conocido como "el fracasado". Hombre sincero, franco, de naturaleza apasionada e infeliz, en ciertos momentos podía parecer cruel, sanguinario, casi un monstruo, y podía también sacrificarse sin vacilaciones y sin esperar ninguna recompensa.

A cerca de tres verstas de la ciudad, el carruaje penetró súbitamente en la oscuridad suave de un bosque de hayas, con un ruido de aplastar hojas invisibles, con el olor fresco y amargo de árboles, con pálidas manchas de luz por encima y una masa de sombras abajo. La luna ya se había levantado sobre el horizonte, roja y grande como un escudo de cobre. Apareciendo bajo los árboles, el carruaje surgió delante de una pequeña casa de campo. Tres ventanas iluminadas resaltaban vivamente en la fachada y empalidecían el disco de la luna; el gran portón abierto tenía el aspecto de no cerrarse nunca. En el patio, en la penumbra, se podía ver una tartana alta, con dos caballos blancos atados atrás; dos cachorros, también blancos, vinieron corriendo y soltaron ladridos agudos pero inofensivos. En la casa empezó a moverse gente, el carruaje rodó hasta la puerta y, saliendo con dificultad y buscando con el pie el peldaño de hierro, colocado como siempre, por el herrero de la casa, en el peor lugar posible, Markélov dijo a Nezhdánov:

-Estamos en casa... y encontrará a unas personas que conoce bien, pero que ciertamente no esperaba encontrar aquí. ¡Por favor!

XI

Librodot

ESAS personas eran nuestros viejos conocidos Ostrodúmov y Mashúrina. Estaban sentados en la pequeña sala de estar de Markélov, extremadamente mal amueblada, y, a la luz de un quinqué de queroseno, bebían cerveza y fumaban. No se sorprendieron con la llegada de Nezhdánov, pues sabían que Markélov quería traerlo. Pero Nezhdánov quedó muy asombrado al verles. A su entrada, Ostrodúmov dijo sólo:

-Buenas noches, hermano.

Mashúrina primero se ruborizó y después le alargó la mano. Markélov explicó a Nezhdánov que Ostrodúmov y Mashúrina habían sido enviados por la causa común, que ahora debería realizarse pronto; que Ostrodúmov se quedaría en S. con fines de propaganda, pero que Mashúrina iría a K. para encontrarse con cierta persona.

De golpe, aunque nadie le contradijo, Markélov se enfadó. Con los ojos chispeando, mordiéndose el bigote, empezó a hablar, muy agitado, con la voz ronca pero inteligible, de los verdaderos horrores que tenían lugar, de la necesidad de actuar sin demora, que estaban todos listos, que sólo un cobarde podría querer aplazamientos, que cierta violencia era necesaria como la punta de un bisturí en un absceso por más maduro que estuviera. Repitió algunas veces más esta comparación del bisturí: sin duda le agradaba, aunque no fuera suya y la hubiese leído en alguna parte. Parecía que, habiendo perdido ya toda esperanza de conseguir el amor de Marianna, no deseara nada más y sólo pensara en empezar "la cosa". Hablaba concisamente como si diera martilladas, sin ninguna estratagema, abrupto, simplemente y con furia; las palabras caían, monótonas y pesadas, unas tras otras, de sus labios pálidos, recordando los ladridos salvajes de un viejo sabueso. Dijo que conocía bien a los mujiks y a los obreros de la vecindad, que había entre ellos algunas personas eficientes -como, por ejemplo, un tal Ereméi-, que estaban listas en cualquier momento. Este Ereméi, Ereméi del pueblo Golopliók, le venía constantemente a la lengua. Cada diez palabras golpeaba con la mano derecha -no con la palma sino con los huesos- la mesa, agitaba la izquierda en el aire, con el dedo índice tieso. Esta mano fuerte y peluda, este índice, esta voz áspera, estos ojos chispeantes daban una impresión de fuerza. Durante el viaje, Markélov había hablado poco con Nezhdánov, y toda su ira acumulada... reventaba ahora. Mashúrina y Ostrodúmov se expresaban con una sonrisa, con una mirada, a veces con una corta exclamación. Pero una extraña sensación cayó sobre Nezhdánov. Primero intentó levantar objeciones, recordó el peligro de una acción apresada, habló de ciertas tentativas anteriores prematuras, y sobre todo se sorprendía de que todo estuviera ya decidido y sin dudas, sin tener en cuenta las circunstancias especiales e incluso sin intentar saber lo que las masas realmente querían... Pero después todos sus nervios quedaron tensos como las cuerdas vibrantes de un instrumento, y habló con una especie de desespero, casi con lágrimas furiosas en los ojos, en el mismo tono de Markélov y yendo aún más lejos que él. Seria difícil decir lo que le inspiraba, si el remordimiento en relación a sí mismo y a los otros, el deseo de ahogar sus torturas interiores, o aún, finalmente, el deseo de exhibirse ante los camaradas que había vuelto a encontrar... ¿o quizás las palabras de Markélov habían actuado sobre él y le habían inflamado la sangre? De esta forma continuaron discutiendo hasta rayar el alba. Ostrodúmov y Mashúrina no se levantaron de sus bancos, pero Markélov y Nezhdánov no se sentaron. Markélov estuvo siempre de pie en el mismo lugar como un centinela; Nezhdánov se paseaba por la sala con pasos nerviosos, ora lentos, ya apresurados. Hablaron de los medios y las medidas necesarias; de la parte que cada uno tenía que desempeñar; eligieron y ataron varios paquetes de folletos y panfletos; se refirieron a un comerciante inconformista, un tal Golushkin, una posibilidad, aunque sin educación; a un joven propagandista, Kisliakov, que era muy culto, pero que tenía ya una idea exagerada de sus talentos; y hablaron también de Solomin...

-¿Es ese que dirige la fábrica de tejidos? -preguntó Nezhdánov, que recordaba lo que se había dicho de él en la mesa, en casa de Sipiaguin.

-Precisamente -respondió Markélov-. Tiene que conocerle. Aún no lo hemos sondeado, pero se trata de un hombre eficiente, muy eficiente.

Ereméi de Golopliók entró de nuevo en escena,juntamente con un siervo de Sipiaguin

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llamado Kiril y también un tal Mendeléi, apodado "el Malhumorado", pero el tal "Malhumorado" no era muy de confianza: cuando estaba sobrio era muy corajoso, pero cuando se emborrachaba era un cobarde. Y estaba casi siempre borracho.

-Bien, ¿y entre su propia gente? -preguntó Nezhdánov a Markélov-. ¿No hay personas de confianza?

Markélov respondió que sí, pero no mencionó ningún nombre y siguió hablando de los pequeños burgueses y estudiantes, que serían, además, más útiles si las cosas llegaban a garrotazos en las calles. Nezhdánov le hizo preguntas sobre la aristocracia de la región. Markélov respondió que había cinco o seis jóvenes, uno de los cuales incluso era alemán... y muy radical, pero desgraciadamente nadie se puede fiar de los alemanes... ¡acaban siempre por engañarnos o traicionarnos! Era necesario esperar y ver qué informaciones reuniría Kisliakov. Nezhdánov quiso saber también qué pasaba con los militares de la región y Markélov vaciló mucho, retorció sus largas patillas y aclaró que nada -de momento- se sabía de definitivo... excepto si Kisliakov descubriera alguna cosa.

-Pero ¿quién es ese Kisliakov? -preguntó Nezhdánov con impaciencia.

Markélov sonrió significativamente y dijo que era un tipo... ¡qué tipo...!

-Le conozco poco -añadió-. Sólo me he encontrado con él un par de veces, pero ¡las cartas que escribe, las cartas que escribe! ¡He de mostrárselas! ¡Verá qué actividad! Ya ha recorrido Rusia de punta a punta cinco o seis veces... y de cada sitio escribe una carta de diez o doce páginas.

Nezhdánov miró interrogativamente a Ostrodúmov, pero éste estaba sentado como una estatua y no movió siquiera una ceja. Mashúrina tenía encerrada entre sus labios una sonrisa amarga -y estaba también inmóvil. Nezhdánov continuó haciendo preguntas a Markélov sobre sus experiencias socialistas en la propiedad... pero aquí Ostrodúmov los interrumpió.

-¿Para qué hablar de eso ahora? -observó-. De todas formas, habrá que cambiarlo todo después.

La conversación volvió a la política. El misterioso dolor íntimo continuó de nuevo atormentando a Nezhdánov, pero cuanto mayor era ese dolor, más alto e irrevocablemente hablaba. Había bebido sólo un vaso de cerveza, pero de vez en cuando parecía estar embriagado y la cabeza le giraba y el corazón le latía febrilmente. Cuando, finalmente, a las cuatro de la madrugada, la discusión terminó y todos pasaron cerca del criado que dormía en la antecámara, a fin de retirarse para los otros cuartos, Nezhdánov, antes de meterse en la cama, se quedó largo rato inmóvil, con los ojos fijos. Estaba sorprendido del tono orgulloso y conmovedor que Markélov daba a todo lo que decía. La vanidad de ese hombre debía de haber sido profundamente herida, debía de haber sufrido, pero ¡con qué nobleza se olvidaba de sí mismo, cómo se entregaba a aquello que consideraba la verdad!

«Es una persona limitada», pensó Nezhdánov, «pero ¿no es cien veces mejor que las personas como yo... tal, por ejemplo, como yo me siento?»

Pero aquí sintió una gran indignación contra su propia autohumillación.

«Pero ¿por qué? ¿No seré yo capaz del autosacrificio? Esperad, señores... Y tú, Paklin, con el tiempo verás que yo, a pesar de ser un esteta y de hacer versos...»

Furioso, se tiró el pelo hacia atrás con la mano, hizo rechinar los dientes y, desnudándose apresuradamente, se metió en la cama fría y húmeda.

-¡Buenas noches! -dijo, del otro lado de la puerta, la voz de Mashúrina-. Soy... su vecina.

-Adiós -respondió Nezhdánov. Y de golpe recordó que, durante toda la noche, la muchacha no había apartado los ojos de él.

¿Qué querrá ésta? -murmuró él. Y se sintió avergonzado-. ¡Ah, si pudiera dormirme deprisa!

Pero era difícil calmar los nervios... y el sol ya estaba muy alto en el cielo cuando, finalmente, cayó en un sueño pesado e intranquilo.

A la mañana siguiente se levantó tarde, con dolor de cabeza, se acercó hasta la ventana de la buhardilla, donde se encontraba su habitación, y vio que la casa y las tierras de Markélov

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estaban situadas en un pequeño llano no lejos de un bosque. Un granero, los establos, el almacén, una pequeña cabaña con un techo de paja muy poco espeso, a un lado; al otro, un pequeño lago, un huerto, un campo de cáñamo y otra cabaña con tejado de paja; lejos, una era, un granero para el desgrane y una era vacía era toda la "riqueza" que sus ojos encontraban. Todo parecía pobre, decadente, no por negligencia o porque dejasen las cosas abandonadas, sino como si nunca florecieran, como un árbol mal arraigado. Nezhdánov bajó. Mashúrina estaba sentada en la mesa cerca del samovar y, evidentemente, le esperaba. Le dijo que Ostrodúmov había salido para tratar de un asunto de la causa y no volvería antes de dos semanas, y que el señor de la casa había ido a ver a sus jornaleros. Como mayo llegaba ya al fin y no había trabajos urgentes, Markélov pensó cortar un pequeño bosque de abedules con sus propios medios y había ido allí por la mañana.

Nezhdánov sintió un extraño cansancio en el alma. El día anterior se había hablado tanto de la imposibilidad de un nuevo aplazamiento, que sólo quedaba "lanzarse adelante". Pero ¿cómo habían de lanzarse adelante así, de repente? No valía la pena discutir el asunto con Mashúrina: ella no conocía vacilaciones, no tenía dudas sobre lo que tenía que hacer, que era precisamente ir a K. No veía más allá que eso. Nezhdánov no sabía qué decirle y, terminado el té, cogió el sombrero y se fue en dirección al bosque de abedules. En el camino encontró a algunos mujiks que iban en un carro de estiércol, antiguos siervos de Markélov. Les habló... pero la mayor parte no le entendió. También parecían agitados, pero con un cansancio físico normal, muy diferente de su sensación. Se refirieron a su antiguo señor como un barin muy simple, pero un poco original, y pronosticaron su ruina porque no sabía hacer las cosas como debía ser y que tenía su manera, diferente de sus antepasados.

-También es muy listo. ¡A veces no comprendemos lo que dice, por más que lo intentemos!

Nezhdánov continuó y se encontró con el mismo Markélov. Estaba rodeado por toda una chusma de trabajadores y, desde lejos, se podía ver que estaba intentando explicarles algo, y después dejó caer los brazos... como diciendo: ¡es inútil! A su lado estaba el casero, un joven bajo y corto de vista, sin la más mínima firmeza ni aire autoritario, que repetía continuamente: «¡Es así mismo!», para gran disgusto del amo, que esperaba más independencia por su parte. Nezhdánov se dirigió a Markélov y vio en su rostro la misma expresión de cansancio espiritual que él mismo sentía. Se saludaron y Markélov empezó a hablar en seguida -aunque más resumidamente- de los "problemas" del día anterior, de la inminente revolución; pero sin que su expresión de cansancio le abandonara. Estaba todo cubierto de polvo, de sudor; tenía la ropa llena de virutas de madera y trozos de musgo verde, y la voz ronca... A su alrededor, los hombres estaban callados, medio recelosos, medio divertidos... Nezhdánov miró a Markélov y las palabras de Ostrodúmov le sonaron en los oídos: «¿Para qué? ¡De todas formas, habrá que cambiarlo todo después!» Uno de los hombres, que había cometido una falta, empezó a pedir a Markélov que le perdonase la multa... En un primer momento Markélov se enfadó y gritó violentamente, pero después le perdonó... «De todas formas, habrá que cambiarlo todo...» Nezhdánov le pidió caballos y el carruaje para regresar. Pareció sorprendido, pero respondió que todo estaría listo rápidamente.

Volvieron juntos a casa... Durante el camino, Markélov se tambaleaba de cansancio.

-¿Qué tiene usted? -preguntó Nezhdánov.

-Estoy agotado -dijo él furiosamente-. Haga lo que sea, no comprenden y son incapaces de ejecutar una orden. Ni el ruso entienden. La palabra "parte" la conocen bien... pero "participación"... ¿Qué es participación? ¡No comprenden! Y es una palabra rusa, ¡qué diablos! Se han creído que lo que yo quiero es darles una parte de la tierra.

Markélov había intentado explicar a los campesinos los principios de la cooperación, con el objetivo de introducirlos en la propiedad, pero ellos se habían opuesto. Uno de ellos incluso llegó a decir: «Había un pozo hondo... que ahora ni de día se le ve el fondo...», y todos los otros soltaron un profundo suspiro de simpatía, que aplastó completamente a Markélov.

Cuando llegaron a casa, se ocuparon del carruaje y del desayuno. Todo su personal consistía en un criado, un cocinero, un cochero, y un hombre muy viejo de orejas peludas, con

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un largo caftán de lino, que había sido ayuda de cámara de su padre. Este viejo estaba siempre presente, miraba a su barin con honda tristeza, pero verdaderamente no hacía nada. Sólo estaba siempre allí, dormitando junto a la puerta.

Después de un almuerzo a base de huevos duros, anchoas y sopa fría de kvas (la mostaza era servida de una vieja caja de pomada por un criado, y el vinagre de un frasco de agua de colonia), Nezhdánov entró en el mismo carruaje en el que había venido el día anterior, pero en vez de tres caballos tenía sólo dos, pues el tercero había sido herrado y cojeaba un poco. Después del almuerzo, Markélov había hablado poco, no había comido nada, y respiraba con dificultad... Dejó escapar dos o tres palabras amargas sobre su propiedad, y de nuevo dejó caer los brazos en señal de desespero... «De todas formas, habrá que cambiarlo todo después.» Mashúrina pidió a Nezhdánov que la llevara hasta la ciudad, pues tenía que hacer unas compras «y de vuelta vengo caminando... o pido a un mujik que encuentre por el camino que me traiga».

Acompañándoles a la puerta, Markélov dijo que pronto haría venir de nuevo a Nezhdánov y entonces... entonces (se estremeció, pero de nuevo se contuvo) decidirían las cosas definitivamente; Solomin vendría también. Él, Markélov, sólo esperaba noticias de Vasili Nikoláievich... y entonces nada impediría un "principio" pues el pueblo (el mismo pueblo que no comprendía la palabra "participación") ¡no estaba dispuesto a esperar más!

-Y sobre las cartas que me quería mostrar... de ese... ¿cómo se llama? ¿Kisliakov? -preguntó Nezhdánov.

-Después... después... -dijo Markélov apresuradamente-. Podremos leerlas todos juntos.

El carruaje partió.

-¡Prepárese! -se oyó por última vez la voz de Markélov. Se había quedado en los peldaños de la entrada y a su lado, con la misma tristeza en la mirada, enderezándose y apretando las manos detrás de la espalda, dejando tras sí un olor de pan de centeno y moho, y sin oír nada, estaba el fiel servidor, el decrépito ayuda de cámara del padre.

Mashúrina siguió callada hasta la ciudad, fumando durante todo el camino. Cuando se acercaba a las puertas de la ciudad, soltó, como de costumbre, un suspiro alto.

-Me da tanta lástima Serguéi Mijáilovich dijo. Y su expresión quedó lúgubre.

-Tiene demasiado trabajo -observó Nezhdánov-. Y me parece que su propiedad va mal.

-No es por eso que me da lástima.-Entonces ¿por qué?

-Es un hombre tan infeliz, ¡muy desgraciado!... Sería difícil encontrar alguien mejor que él... ¡pero qué! ¡No tiene suerte!

Nezhdánov miró a su compañera de viaje.

¿Sabe algo de él?

-Nada... pero puede sentirse. Adiós, Alexéi Dmítrich.

Mashúrina saltó del carruaje y una hora después Nezhdánov entraba en el patio de la casa de Sipiaguin. No se sentía muy bien... Había pasado la noche sin dormir... y después, todas aquellas discusiones... todas_ aquellas conversaciones.

Un bello rostro miró desde la ventana y le sonrió amistosamente... Era la señora Sipiaguin que saludaba su regreso.

«¡Qué ojos los suyos!», pensó él.

XII

Ala cena asistió mucha gente, pero en seguida que terminó, aprovechando la confusión general, Nezhdánov se retiró a su habitación. Quería estar solo, para poner en orden las impresiones captadas durante el viaje. En la mesa, Valentina Mijáilovna le miró algunas veces fijamente pero no tuvo oportunidad de hablarle. Después de aquel inesperado desahogo que le había dejado perplejo, Marianna parecía arrepentida y le evitaba. Nezhdánov cogió la pluma para conversar en

Comentario [Librodot-75]: Especie de túnica usada en varios países orientales y por la pequeña burguesía (comerciantes) rusa del siglo pasado. Como pieza de vestuario se puso muy de moda en Europa durante los años 60 de nuestro siglo con los jipis y entró en el léxico de muchas lenguas modernas.

Comentario [Librodot-76]: El kvas es una especie de cerveza floja hecha de pan de centeno, muy popular en Rusia como bebida refrescante en verano.

el papel con su amigo Silin, pero no sabía qué decirle. O, quizá, había tantos pensamientos contradictorios y sensaciones amontonadas en su cabeza, que no intentó ordenarlas y lo dejó para otro día. Uno de los invitados a la cena era también Kaloméitsev. Nunca había mostrado mayor insolencia y desprecio esnob, pero sus palabras ya no molestaban a Nezhdánov, que empezó a ignorar las. Estaba rodeado por una especie de nube, que flotaba como una cortina entre él y el resto del mundo -y, extrañamente, a través de esa cortina sólo pasaban tres rostros- y los tres de mujeres, y los tres mirándole fijamente. Eran la señora Sipiaguin, Mashúrina y Marianna. ¿Qué quería decir aquello? ¿Y por que razón precisamente aquellos tres rostros? ¿Qué tenían en común? ¿Y qué querían de él?

Se fue temprano a la cama, pero no consiguió dormirse. Le perseguían pensamientos tristes, lúgubres... pensamientos de final inevitable, de muerte. Ya los conocía. Durante mucho tiempo se movió de un lado a otro, ora estremeciéndose ante la posibilidad de aniquilamiento, ya recibiéndola con agrado y casi regocijándose. Por fin, sintió una agitación particular, ya conocida... Se levantó, se sentó en la mesa y, después de meditar un poco, casi sin corregir, escribió el siguiente poema en su cuaderno íntimo:

Querido amigo, cuando me muera,
Este pedido no olvides:

Todo lo que mi corazón escribió
¡Destruye sin vacilación!
Que para mí se abran las flores,
Y el Sol entre en tu habitación,
Por las puertas abiertas
Deja que entren los músicos.
¡Impídeles llorar tristemente!
Que como en un banquete
De golpe suene un vals insolente
Sobre los golpes de los tambores!
Yo escucharé, como nunca antes,
La espalda estremeciendo
Y en el silencio muerto
Que no se confunde con un quejido inútil,
Me voy al otro mundo,
Mecido por los sonidos suaves
De mi tierna alegría terrena.

Cuando escribió la palabra "amigo", pensó en Silin. Leyó el poema para sí mismo y quedó sorprendido conlo que había salido de su pluma. Aquel escepticismo, aquella indiferencia, aquella falta de fe tan frívola ¿cómo podía estar todo aquello de acuerdo con sus principios? ¿Con lo que había dicho a Markélov? Lanzó el cuaderno al cajón y volvió a la cama. Pero sólo se durmió de madrugada, cuando ya las primeras alondras empezaban a piar y el cielo empalidecía.

Al día siguiente, apenas había acabado la clase y se había sentado en la sala de billar, la señora Sipiaguin entró, miró alrededor y, con una sonrisa, se le dirigió, para que fuera a su salón privado. Llevaba un vestido claro de algodón, muy simple y muy bonito; los volantes de encaje de las mangas llegaban sólo hasta los codos, una ancha cinta le contorneaba la cintura, el pelo le caía sobre el cuello con pesados tirabuzones. Todo en ella respiraba amistad y ternura, una ternura cautelosa pero alentadora; todo: el brillo de sus ojos semicerrados, la indolencia suave de su voz, los gestos, la propia manera de caminar. La señora Sipiaguin condujo a Nezhdánov a su salón privado, confortable, agradable, lleno de olor a flores y perfumes, de la frescura pura de ropas femeninas, de la constante presencia femenina. Hizo que se sentara en un sillón, ella se sentó a su lado y empezó a hacerle preguntas sobre su visita, sobre la manera de vivir de Markélov, todo ello con mucho tacto y delicadeza. Mostró

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un genuino interés por su hermano, sin que lo mencionara una sola vez delante de Nezhdánov. Por sus palabras, podía comprenderse que la impresión causada por Marianna a su hermano no le había pasado inadvertida. Estaba un poco desilusionada... pero era difícil saber si era por el hecho de que Marianna no correspondía a los sentimientos del hermano o porque la elección había caído en una muchacha tan diferente de él. Pero, sobre todo, intentó domesticar a Nezhdánov, captar su confianza, romper su timidez. Valentina Mijáilovna llegó a censurarlo por no comprenderla.

Nezhdánov la escuchó, contempló sus brazos, sus hombros, de vez en cuando lanzó una mirada hacia sus labios rosados y hacia su pelo ligeramente crespo y pesado. Primeramente respondía con mucha brusquedad; sentía un aprieto en la garganta y en el pecho... pero poco a poco esta sensación cedió lugar a otra, aún perturbadora, pero no sin un cierto dulzor: no esperaba de ningún modo que una bárinia tan importante y tan bella, tan aristocrática, se molestara en interesarse por él, un simple estudiante. Y ella no sólo se interesaba sino que, en cierto modo, incluso coqueteaba un poco con él. Nezhdánov se interrogaba sobre sus objetivos al verla actuar así. Y no encontró respuesta. Sí, para hablar sinceramente, él no deseaba nada de eso. La señora Sipiaguin le habló de Kolia, llegó incluso a asegurar a Nezhdánov que deseaba conocerle mejor sólo para poder conversar con él seriamente sobre su hijo, conocer sus puntos de vista sobre la educación de los niños rusos. Podía parecer un poco extraño que aquél deseo le viniera tan repentinamente. Pero el problema no residía en lo que Valentina Mijáilovna decía, sino en el hecho de que había sido arrebatada por un deseo de conquistar y tener a sus pies a aquel joven rebelde.

Pero aquí es necesario volver un poco atrás.

Valentina Mijáilovna era hija de un general muy limitado y poco inteligente, con una sola estrella y una hebilla después de cincuenta años de servicio. Era muy voluntariosa y astuta, natural de la Pequeña Rusia, dotada, como muchas de sus conterráneas, de un aire simple y incluso algo estúpido, con el que sabía sacar todas las ventajas posibles. Los padres de Valentina Mijáilovna no eran ricos, pero la mandaron al Convento de Smolni, donde, aunque considerada una republicana, siempre destacó y estuvo en las primeras filas por su buen comportamiento y por ser un ejemplo para las otras. Cuando salió de Smolni, fue a vivir con su madre (el hermano había ido a la provincia, y el padre, el general con una estrella y una hebilla, había muerto ya) a un apartamento agradable pero muy frío, donde se podía ver el aliento cuando se hablaba. Valentina Mijáilovna sonreía y aseguraba que era "como en la iglesia". Era animosa para soportar toda la incomodidad de una vida de pobreza. Tenía un temperamento asombroso. Con la ayuda de la madre, consiguió aguantar la situación e hizo nuevas amistades. En la alta sociedad se referían a ella como una muchacha muy inteligente y bien educada, y muy digna. Tenía varios pretendientes; de todos ellos escogió a Sipiaguin y le hizo enamorarse de una manera muy simple, rápida e inteligente... Y éste no tardó en comprender que no encontraría mejor esposa. Era inteligente, no tenía mal genio... por el contrario, era bondadosa, en el fondo fría e indiferente... pero no soportaba la idea de que alguien pudiera quedar indiferente ante ella. Valentina Mijáilovna estaba poseída por aquel particular encanto que es característico de los egoístas "inteligentes", aquel encanto donde no hay poesía ni verdadera sensibilidad, sino sólo afabilidad, simpatía, incluso ternura. Pero eso no sirve a estos egoístas: son dominantes, y no soportan la independencia de los otros. Mujeres como la señora Sipiaguin excitan y perturban a las personas inexpertas y emotivas, pero ellas mismas prefieren una vida calmada y tranquila. La virtud les es fácil. Son apacibles, pero su constante deseo de dominar, de atraer y de agradar les da movilidad y brillo: tienen una gran fuerza de voluntad y la mayor parte de su fascinación es debida a esa fuerza de voluntad... Es difícil para un hombre resistir cuando, con tanto brillo, estos seres intocables empiezan a moverse apasionadamente como centellas misteriosas. Un hombre espera que venga la hora del ataque -y que el hielo se funda, pero los rayos del sol sólo juguetean en la superficie y el hielo no sólo no se funde, sino que ni siquiera se ablanda.

Comentario [Librodot-77]: Ucrania.

Le era muy fácil a la señora Sipiaguin coquetear: sabía muy bien que eso no implicaba ningún riesgo para ella. Pero quitar el empañado de los ojos a otra persona

y hacerlos brillar de nuevo, ver la cara de otra persona ruborizándose de deseo y miedo, oír su voz temblar y flaquear, perturbar el alma de otro ser, oh, ¡que dulce era para su alma! ¡Qué agradable era recordar más tarde, durante la noche, tumbada en su lecho puro, en un sueño sereno; recordar todas aquellas palabras agitadas, y miradas, y suspiros! Con qué sonrisa satisfecha se retiraba hacia dentro de ella misma, hacia la conciencia de su inaccesibilidad, de su invulnerabilidad; ¡y con qué condescendencia se entregaba a las caricias legales de su bien educado marido! Era tan agradable, que a veces hasta se llenaba de emoción, sintiéndose dispuesta a hacer una buena acción para ayudar al prójimo... Una vez fundó una pequeña casa de misericordia, después de que uno de sus enamorados, un secretario de embajada, intentara cortarse la garganta. Rezó fervorosamente por él, aunque desde muy joven sus sentimientos religiosos fuesen bastante débiles.

Así conversó con Nezhdánov y lo intentó todo para ponerle "a sus pies". Permitió que él se acercara, se abrió delante de él y, con una dulce curiosidad, con una ternura semimaternal, observó como aquel bello, interesante y severo radical se ablandaba y se rendía torpemente. Un día, una hora, un minuto después, todo aquello desaparecería sin dejar huellas, pero mientras duraba era agradable, un poco patético, un poco divertido, e incluso un poco triste. Habiendo olvidado su origen y sabiendo como esa atención es apreciada por las personas solitarias entre extraños, Valentina Mijáilovna empezó a hacer preguntas a Nezhdánov sobre su juventud, sobre su familia... Pero cuando vio, por sus respuestas cortas y escasas, que había cometido un error, intentó corregirlo y empezó a abrirse aún más... igual como, en un mediodía caliente de verano la rosa abre sus pétalos fragantes, que cierra de nuevo rígidamente al llegar el frío de la noche.

No consiguió, sin embargo, corregir del todo su error. Habiendo sido tocado en un punto sensible,

Nezhdánov ya no podía volver a su confianza anterior. Aquella amargura, que siempre llevaba, que siempre sentía en el fondo del alma, se agitó de nuevo y le despertó las sospechas y censuras políticas. «No vine para esto», pensó, recordando las prevenciones de Paklin... y, aprovechándose del primer momento de silencio, se levantó, hizo una pequeña reverencia y salió "muy estúpidamente", como sin querer dijo para sí.

Su perturbación no escapó a Valentina Mijáilovna... y a juzgar por la sonrisa con la que le siguió, consideraba esta perturbación una ventaja a su favor.

En la sala de billar, Nezhdánov encontró a Marianna. Estaba de espaldas a la ventana, no muy lejos de la puerta del salón privado de la señora Sipiaguin, con los brazos cruzados con fuerza. Su rostro estaba casi totalmente oscurecido, pero miraba a Nezhdánov tan interrogativamente, tan persistentemente con su mirada audaz, tanto desprecio e insultante piedad expresaban sus labios cerrados, que él se detuvo, perplejo.

¿Quiere decirme algo? -preguntó sin querer. Marianna no contestó en seguida.

-No... o antes, sí, quería. Pero no ahora.

-Entonces, ¿cuándo?

-Tendrá que esperar un poco. Quizá mañana, quizá nunca. Le conozco tan poco. ¿Cómo es usted realmente?

-De todas maneras -empezó Nezhdánov-, a veces me parece... que entre nosotros...

-Pero usted no me conoce -interrumpió Marianna-. Espere un poco. Quizá mañana. Ahora tengo que ir a ver a mi... señora. Hasta mañana.

Nezhdánov dio uno o dos pasos hacia adelante, pero de golpe se volvió:

Ah, ¡sí! Marianna Vikéntievna... quería pedirle que me permita acompañarla a la escuela antes de que cierre para ver cómo funciona.

-Con mucho gusto... Pero no era sobre la escuela de lo que quería hablarle.

-Entonces ¿sobre qué era?

-Mañana -repitió Marianna.

Pero no esperó hasta el día siguiente. Su conversación con Nezhdánov tuvo lugar esa misma tarde, en una de las alamedas de tilos que empezaban junto a la terraza.

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XIII

FUE ella quien se acercó a él.

-Señor Nezhdánov -empezó, con una voz rápida-, parece ser que está verdaderamente fascinado por Valentina Mijáilovna.

Se giró y, sin esperar respuesta, continuó hacia la alameda. Él la siguió.

-¿Por qué piensa eso? -preguntó él, poco después.

-¿Acaso no es cierto? Si no lo es, ella actuó hoy de una manera muy imprudente. Imagino lo preocupada que debía estar y cómo intentó atraparle entre sus redes.

Nezhdánov no contestó, sólo miró de lado a su extraña interlocutora.

-Óigame -continuó ella-. No vale la pena continuar simulando: no me gusta Valentina Mijáilovna... y usted lo sabe muy bien. Quizá esté siendo injusta... pero piense primero...

La voz de Marianna se rompió. Se ruborizó, quedó perturbada. Con las emociones daba siempre la impresión de que estaba furiosa.

-Seguro que se está preguntando empezó ella de nuevo-, por qué razón esta bárishnia le está contando todo esto. Y seguro que pensó también lo mismo cuando le hablé... del señor Markélov.

Comentario [Librodot-78]: Diminutivo de bárinia.

De repente se inclinó, cogió un pequeño hongo, lo partió en trozos y lo lanzó hacia el lado.

-Está equivocada, Marianna Vikéntievna –observó Nezhdánov-. Por lo contrario, pensé que yo le inspiraba confianza... y la idea me agradó mucho.

Nezhdánov no decía toda la verdad: aquella idea le vino en aquel mismo instante.

Marianna le miró durante un momento. Hasta entonces, había evitado su mirada.

-Usted no me inspira precisamente confianza -dijo ella, pensativa-. Me es totalmente extraño. Pero su posición y la mía son muy semejantes. Ambos somos igualmente infelices. Y es eso lo que nos une.

-¿Usted es infeliz? -preguntó Nezhdánov.

-Y usted... ¿no lo es? -respondió Marianna. Él no contestó.

¿Conoce mi historia? -preguntó ella con energía-. ¿La historia de mi padre? ¿De su exilio? ¿No? Entonces tiene que saber que fue llevado a juicio, condenado, privado de su puesto... y enviado a Siberia. Después murió... y mi madre también. Mi tío, el señor Sipiaguin, hermano de mi madre, me crió: vivo de su pan, es mi bienhechor... y Valentina Mijáilovna es mi bienhechora... y yo les pago con ingratitud, sin duda tengo un corazón duro, pero el pan ajeno es amargo, y yo no soy capaz de aceptar una condescendencia insultante, y no puedo soportar las protecciones... y no puedo disimular... y cuando me hieren constantemente, si no lloro es por orgullo.

Mientras decía esto, Marianna empezó a caminar cada vez más deprisa.

De repente, paró.

-¿Sabe que mi tía, sólo para verse libre de mí, tiene la intención de casarme... con ese horrible Kaloméitsev? De todas maneras, conoce bien mis convicciones y a sus ojos soy una nihilista... y él... Yo, seguro, no le agrado, no soy bonita, pero siempre cabe la posibilidad de venderme. Sería también caridad.

-¿Por qué motivo usted...? -empezó Nezhdánov. Pero se calló.

Marianna le miró durante un momento.

-Quiere decir ¿por qué razón no acepté el señor Markélov, no? Es un buen hombre. Pero no tengo la culpa de no amarle.

Marianna avanzó de nuevo, como queriendo ahorrar a su compañero la necesidad de hacer cualquier comentario a esta inesperada confesión.

Llegaron al fin de la alameda. Marianna se giró rápidamente hacia una vereda estrecha que conducía a un denso bosque de abetos, y continuó andando por él. Nezhdánov la siguió. Dos cosas le dejaban perplejo: la primera, que le parecía extraño que aquella muchacha tímida

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se abriera de repente de esa manera ante él... y la segunda el hecho de que eso no le sorprendiera, sino que lo encontrara natural.

Marianna se giró de repente y se paró en medio del camino, con el rostro a menos de un metro del de Nezhdánov, mirándole directamente a los ojos.

-Alexéi Dmítritch -dijo ella-, no piense que mi tía es una mala mujer... ¡No! Todo lo que hace es mentir. Es una comediante, le gusta presumir... que todos la adoren como una beldad... y se inclinen ante ella como ante un santo. Es capaz de inventar un discurso maravilloso, decirlo a alguien, y después repetirlo a una segunda y a una tercera persona... fingiendo que lo pensó precisamente en aquel momento al mismo tiempo que juega con aquellos ojos maravillosos suyos. Se conoce muy bien... sabe que se parece a una Madonna y que no quiere a nadie. Finge que se preocupa mucho por Kolia... y todo lo que hace es hablar de él con personas inteligentes. Pero no desea mal a nadie... Es toda bondad. Sin embargo, si todos los huesos de su cuerpo fuesen aplastados delante de ella... no haría nada. No movería un dedo para salvarle, y si eso le fuera necesario o provechoso... entonces... ¡oh, entonces!

Marianna se calló. La furia la sofocó. Decidió dejar que se expresara, no pudo contenerse, pero las palabras involuntariamente le fallaron. Marianna pertenecía a una clase particular de seres infelices -muy frecuentes en

Rusia- a quien la justicia satisface pero no alegra, mientras la injusticia, a la que son profundamente sensibles, les indigna hasta las profundidades del alma. Mientras hablaba, Nezhdánov la observaba atentamente. Su rostro ruborizado, su pelo corto y en desorden, sus finos labios temblándole, le parecieron amenazadores, significativos... y bellos. La luz del sol, quebrada por una red de ramas, le ponía en la frente una mancha dorada oblicua, y esa lengua de fuego parecía haberse aliado con la expresión excitada de todo su rostro, con sus ojos muy abiertos, fijos y chispeantes, con el tono enfadado de su voz.

-Dígame -le preguntó, por fin, Nezhdánov-, ¿por qué dice que soy infeliz? ¿Conoce mi historia?

Marianna bajó la cabeza.

-Sí.

-¿Y cómo la conoce? ¿Alguien le habló de mí?

-Conozco... su origen.

-Lo sabe... ¿Quién se lo contó?

-Valentina Mijáilovna, naturalmente, por quien usted está tan fascinado. No dejó de observar, ante mí, a propósito de cualquier cosa como siempre, pero intencionadamente, sin lástima, como una persona de ideas avanzadas que está por encima de prejuicios, que había un incidente interesante en la vida de nuestro nuevo profesor. Pero no se admire: Valentina Mijáilovna, del mismo modo casual y con compasión, cuenta a todas sus visitas, imagine, la vida de su sobrina... ¡pues su padre recibía sobornos y fue enviado a Siberia! Por más aristocrática que se crea... ¡no pasa de una simple intrigante, de una farsante, esa su Madonna de Rafael!

-Perdóneme -observó Nezhdánov-, ¿por qué motivo ella es "mía"?

Marianna se giró y continuó caminando por la vereda.

-Tuvieron una conversación tan larga -dijo ella con un tono de voz sordo.

-Yo casi no dije nada -respondió Nezhdánov-. Fue ella quien habló todo el tiempo.

Marianna continuó caminando en silencio. Pero por donde el sendero hacía una curva, los abetos se abrieron, y se encontraron ante un pequeño terreno cubierto de hierba, con un abedul plateado en el centro, cuyo tronco hueco estaba rodeado por un banco redondo. Marianna se sentó en el banco; Nezhdánov tomó lugar a su lado. Sobre sus cabezas se balanceaban suavemente largas ramas colgantes, cubiertas de pequeñas hojas verdes. Alrededor, en la hierba poco espesa, surgía la blancura de los lirios de los valles, y por todas partes se erguía la fragancia fresca de la hierba nueva que aliviaba agradablemente el olor pesado y resinoso de los árboles.

-¿Querrá, pues, venir conmigo a ver la escuela del pueblo? -empezó Marianna-. Pues

vamos. Aunque... no lo sé. Le agradará poco. Ya sabe: nuestro principal profesor es el diácono. Es un buen hombre, pero no puede imaginar las cosas que dice a los niños. Tenemos allá un chiquillo... se llama Garasei... es huérfano, tiene nueve años y, créame, es el que aprende mejor.

Con el cambio de tema en la conversación, Marianna pareció cambiar también: quedó pálida, calma, y en su rostro apareció una sensación de inquietud, como si estuviera avergonzada de todo lo que había dicho. Deseaba evidentemente conducir a Nezhdánov hacia cualquier "cuestión" -la escuela, los campesinos- para no seguir en el tono anterior. Pero, en aquel momento, él no estaba para "cuestiones".

-Marianna Vikéntievna -empezó Nezhdánov-, voy a hablarle francamente: no esperaba de modo alguno todo lo que... ha acontecido entre nosotros -ante la palabra "aconteció" ella se enderezó ligeramente-. Me parece que, de pronto, nosotros... nos hemos hecho íntimos. Así debía ser. Hace mucho que nos aproximamos el uno al otro, pero no nos expresábamos mediante palabras. Por eso le hablé sin reservas. Sin duda es dura su situación en esta casa, pero su tío, aunque limitado, hasta donde puedo juzgar, pareceun buen hombre... ¿No comprende su posición y no la apoya?

-¿Mi tío? En primer lugar, mi tío no es un hombre sino un funcionario... senador o ministro... no lo sé bien. En segundo lugar... no quiero quejarme y hablar contra otras personas: mi situación no es nada dura, o sea, nadie me molesta. Los alfilerazos de mi tía no me molestan mucho... soy verdaderamente libre.

Nezhdánov la miró sorprendido.

-En ese caso... todo lo que acaba de contarme...

-Puede reír -dijo ella-. Si soy infeliz, no es por mi infelicidad. A veces me parece que sufro por todos los pobres e infelices de Rusia... no, no es eso... pero estoy indignada por su causa, me revuelvo... por tener que agachar la cabeza. Soy infeliz por ser una "bárishnia", una parásita, porque no sé nada ni puedo hacer nada. Cuando mi padre fue enviado a Siberia y me quedé con mi madre en Moscú... ¡ah, como deseaba ir hacia él! No porque le quisiera o le respetara demasiado, sino porque quería conocer, ver con mis propios ojos, cómo viven los exilados y los bandidos... ¡Cómo me detesté, a mí y a aquella gente plácida, rica, bien alimentada!... Y después, cuando él volvió, caído, abatido, y empezó a humillarse, a moverse y a buscar favores... ¡Ah, qué duro me pareció! Fue un alivio que hubiera muerto... ¡y mi pobre madre también! Pero yo me quedé... ¿Para qué? Para sentir que tengo una mala naturaleza, que soy ingrata, que para mí no hay paz... y que no puedo hacer nada por nada ni por nadie.

Marianna se giró, la mano se le deslizó hacia el banco. Nezhdánov sentía lástima de ella; tocó su mano caída... pero la muchacha la retiró rápidamente. No porque el movimiento de Nezhdánov le pareciera impropio, sino porque no quería que pensara que ella solicitaba piedad.

A través de las ramas de los abedules, pudo verse, por un momento, un vestido de mujer.

Marianna se enderezó.

-Mire, su Madonna ya mandó a la espía. Esa criada tiene como misión vigilarme e informar a su señora de dónde paso mi tiempo y con quién. Mi tía ciertamente adivinó que yo estaba con usted y consideró que no era propio... sobre todo después de la dramática escena que representó con usted. Pero da igual. Es hora de volver. Vamos.

Marianna se levantó. Nezhdánov se puso también de pie. Ella le miró por encima del hombro y, de golpe, por el rostro le pasó una expresión casi infantil, encantadora, un poco confusa.

-No está enfadado conmigo, ¿verdad que no? ¿No pensará que yo también hice una escena? No; sé que no lo piensa -continuó, antes de que Nezhdánov tuviera tiempo de responder-. Usted es como yo... infeliz... y su naturaleza es también... mala, como la mía. Pero mañana iremos juntos a la escuela, porque ahora somos buenos amigos.

Cuando Marianna y Nezhdánov se acercaron a la casa, Valentina Mijáilovna les miró

desde el balcón con los impertinentes y, con su sonrisa habitual en los labios, movió la cabeza. Después, volviendo, a través de la puerta de cristal abierta, a la sala de visitas, donde Sipiaguin jugaba a las cartas con el vecino desdentado, que había venido para el té, dijo en voz alta y arrastrada, acentuando todas las sílabas:

-¡Que húmedo está el aire! ¡No es nada bueno para la salud!

Marianna cambió una mirada con Nezhdánov, pero Sipiaguin, que había acabado de marcar un punto a su comparsa, echó a la esposa una ojeada verdaderamente ministerial, mirándola de los pies a la cabeza, y después transfirió esa misma mirada ensoñada, fría, pero penetrante, a la joven pareja en el jardín umbroso.

XIV

ASARON más de dos semanas. Todo transcurría en su orden normal. Sipiaguin fijaba las ocupaciones de cada día, si no como un ministro, por lo menos como un director general, y se comportaba, como siempre, altivo, humano y un poco fastidioso; Kolia recibía sus lecciones; Anna Zajárovna seguía preo cupada y llena de rencor; venían visitas, conversaban, jugaban y, según parecía, no se aburrían. Valentina Mijáilovna seguía divirtiéndose con Nezhdánov, aunque su habitual afabilidad se mezclara un poco con un cierto sarcasmo bienintencionado. Nezhdánov se hizo muy íntimo de Marianna y, para sorpresa suya, descubrió que el carácter de la muchacha era bastante equilibrado y que se podía discutir de todo con ella sin provocar ninguna oposición violenta. La había acompañado a la escuela una o dos veces, pero ya en la primera visita vio que no podía hacer nada allí. El padre diácono la controlaba completamente con el consentimiento de Sipia guin y según sus deseos. No enseñaba mal la gramática, aunque utilizaba un método anticuado. En los exámenes hacía preguntas bastante absurdas. Por ejemplo, una vez preguntó a Garasei: «¿Cómo explicas la frase: "Las aguas son oscuras como el firmamento"?», a la que Garasei debía responder por el orden del mismo diálogo: «Es inexplicable.» De todos modos, la escuela pronto fue cerrada hasta el otoño, por las vacaciones de verano. Recordando la sugerencia de Paklin y otros, Nezh dánov intentó también entrar en contacto con los campesinos, pero no tardó en descubrir que apenas los conocía, satisfaciendo así un poco su curiosidad, pero sin hacer ninguna propaganda. Había vivido casi toda su vida en la ciudad y entre él y las personas de provincia había un abismo que no podía cruzar. En cierta ocasión Nezhdánov cambió algunas palabras con el borra

cho Kiril e incluso con Mendeléi, el "Malhumorado", pero estuvo algo tímido ante ellos y, excepto algunos tacos muy conocidos y rápidos, no consiguió oir nada de ellos. Otro mujik -llamado Fitiuiev- le confundió totalmente. Tenía un rostro extrañamente enérgico, parecía un salteador... «Bien, ¡parece prometedor!», pensó Nezhdánov... Pero, ¡no! Fitiuiev no pasaba de un infeliz a quien el *mir* había quitado la tierra porque él -un hombre sano y fuerte- *no podía* trabajar. «¡No puedo!», exclamaba Fitiuiev con una voz honda y sollozante. «¡No puedo trabajar! ¡Matadme! O me quitaré de enmedio!» Y terminó mendigando por las calles... ¡con una cara de Rinaldo Rinaldini! Nezhdánov tampoco entró fácilmente en contacto con los obreros de la fábrica. O eran terriblemente vivos o terriblemente lúgubres... y tampoco con ellos consiguió nada. Sobre todo esto escribió una enorme carta a su amigo Silin, en la cual se quejaba amargamente de su incapacidad, culpando de ello a su pésima educación y a su terrible naturaleza estética. De repente comprendió que su vocación -en el sector de la propaganda- no era hablar sino escribir. Pero los panfletos que ideó no servían. Todo lo que intentaba pasar al papel le daba la misma impresión en cierto modo falsa, cansada, nerviosa de tono y estilo y, una vez o dos -¡oh, horror!- sin darse cuenta, se perdió en verso o en efusiones escépticas o personales. Decidió asimismo (¡importante indicio de confianza e intimidad!)

Comentario [Librodot-79]: Comunidad campesina tradicional.

Comentario [Librodot-80]: Salteador noble, héroe de una novela con el mismo título de Christian August Vulpius (17621827).

hablar de esta carencia suya con Marianna... y, de nuevo para su sorpresa, encontró simpatía en ella, no por su poesía, claro, sino por la debilidad moral que sufría y que no le era extraña. Marianna detestaba tanto la estética como él, pero precisamente por eso no amaba a Markélov y no se casaba con él, porque no había en él el mínimo vestigio de una naturaleza estética. Claro que ni tan siquiera Marianna reconocía tal cosa ante sí misma. A veces pasa que lo que es fuerte en nosotros permanece como un secreto insospechado.

Así pasaban los días, lentos, tranquilos, pero no aburridos del todo.

Algo extraño pasó con Nezhdánov. Se sentía insatisfecho consigo mismo, con su actividad, o, mejor dicho, con su inactividad; sus palabras casi siempre revelaban amargura y sarcasmo autocrítico. Y en su alma, en sus más íntimos recesos, había una sensación de felicidad que le daba una cierta tranquilidad. ¿Sería consecuencia de la calma campestre, del aire, del verano, de la buena comida, de la existencia fácil? ¿O sería debido a que, por primera vez en su vida, probaba la dulzura del contacto con una alma femenina? Sería difícil saberlo con certeza. Pero en su fuero interno se sentía bien, aunque se quejaba -y se quejaba sinceramente- a su amigo Silin.

Sin embargo, esa disposición de Nezhdánov fue abruptamente destruida en un sólo día.

En la mañana de ese día recibió una carta breve de Vasili Nikoláievich dándole instrucciones para que, junto con Markélov, conociera y llegara rápidamente a un acuerdo con Solomin y con un cierto comerciante, Golushkin, un Viejo Creyente que vivía en S. Esa carta molestó a Nezhdánov, ya que también le censuraba por su inactividad. La amargura, que todo el tiempo había borboteado sólo en sus palabras, se le alzaba ahora desde las honduras del alma.

Para la cena apareció Kaloméitsev, turbado y agitado.

-Escuchen -gritó, casi con lágrimas en los ojos-, qué desgracia acabo de leer en el periódico: mi amigo, mi querido Mijaíl, el príncipe servio, ¡fue muerto por unos granujas cualesquieras en Belgrado! ¡Esto es lo que nos traerán estos jacobinos y revolucionarios si no se acaba con ellos con toda firmeza!

Sipiaguin "se permitió observar" que este horrible asesinato era obra probablemente no de jacobinos, "que no parece que haya en Servia", sino de partidarios de Karageórguievich, enemigos de Obrénovich... Pero Kaloméitsev no quería escuchar nada y, aún con lágrimas en los ojos, empezó de nuevo a contar lo mucho que el fallecido príncipe le quería y ¡qué bella pistola le había dado!... Se agitó un poco y, como estaba irritado con los jacobinos extranjeros se volvió contra los nihilistas y socialistas nacionales, y por fin explotó de rabia. Cogió elegantemente, con las dos manos, un gran pan blanco y, rompiéndolo por el medio sobre el plato de sopa, como hacen los parisienses en el *Café Riche,* anunció que le gustaría quebrar, reducir a cenizas a todos los que se opusieran ¡fuera a que fuera y a quien fuera! Se expresó exactamente así: «¡Ya es hora! ¡Ya es hora!», anunció, llevándose la cuchara a la boca. «¡Ya es hora! ¡Ya es hora!», repitió, entregando el vaso al criado que servía el jerez. Recordó con reverencia los grandes hombres de letras de Moscú... *y Ladislas, notre bon et cher Ladislas* no le salía de la lengua. En ese momento fijó la mirada en Nezhdánov, como si le dijera: «¡Esto es para ti! ¡Aguanta! ¡Todo esto es para ti! ¡Y aún hay más!» Este no aguantó más y empezó finalmente a objetar, un poco vacilante (aunque no por miedo) y con la voz trémula. Empezó defendiendo las esperanzas, los principios, los ideales de la juventud. Kaloméitsev no tardó mucho en empezar a gritar -su furia siempre se expresaba en falsete- y a insultar. Sipiaguin, con aire majestuoso, tomó partido por Nezhdánov; Valentina Mijáilovna se mostró de acuerdo con el marido. Anna Zajárovna intentó distraer la atención de Kolia y observaba furiosamente a todos; Marianna no se movía, como si estuviera petrificada.

Comentario [Librodot-81]: Ladislao, nuestro buen y querido Ladislao.

Pero, de repente, al oír por vigésima vez pronunciar el nombre de *Ladislas,* Nezhdánov explotó y, golpeando la mesa con la palma de la mano, exclamó:

-¡Qué autoridad! ¡Como si no supiéramos quien es este *Ladislas!* ¡Un espía nato *y* nada más!

A...a...a...qué... ¿qué dice? -tartamudeó Kaloméitsev, sofocando la rabia-. ¿Cómo se atreve a expresarse así de un hombre que es respetado por personas como el Conde

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Blazenkrampf y el Príncipe Kovrízhkin?

Nezhdánov se encogió de hombros.

-Buena recomendación: el príncipe Kovrízhkin, ese lacayo entusiasta...

-¡Ladislas es amigo mío! -gritó Kaloméitsev-. Es mi camarada, y yo...

-Tanto peor para usted -interrumpió Nezhdánov-. Significa que comparte su manera de pensar y en ese caso mis palabras se aplican también a usted.

Kaloméitsev se puso mortalmente pálido de rabia.

¿Có...cómo? ¿Qué? ¿Cómo se atreve? Debería ser... inmediatamente...

-¿Qué es lo que me haría *inmediatamente?* -interrumpió Nezhdánov con un sarcasmo delicado.

Dios sabe lo que habría resultado de este duelo entre los dos enemigos si Sipiaguin no lo hubiera terminado de raíz. Levantó la voz y, asumiendo un aire serio, en el que no se sabía lo que predominaba, si la solemnidad del hombre de estado o la dignidad del anfitrión, y anunció firme y calmamente que no quería oír más expresiones tan inmoderadas en su mesa; que desde hacía mucho había establecido una regla (y corrigió: una regla sagrada) del respeto por todas las convicciones, mientras (aquí levantó el índice ornamentado con un blasón) se mantengan dentro de los límites del comportamiento decente; que, si por un lado, no podía dejar de condenar al señor Nezhdánov, por cuyas palabras violentas sólo la juventud de sus años podía ser responsable, por el otro, no podía tampoco aceptar el violento ataque del señor Kaloméitsev a personas del campo opuesto... un ataque claramente debido, sin embargo, a su exceso de celo por el bien de la sociedad.

-Bajo mi techo terminó-, bajo el techo de Sipiaguin, no hay jacobinos, ni espías, sólo personas honestas que, comprendiéndose al fin mutuamente, acabarán por estrecharse las manos.

Tanto Nezhdánov como Kaloméitsev quedaron callados, aunque no se estrecharon las manos. Por lo contrario: nunca habían sentido una antipatía mutua tan fuerte. La cena terminó en un silencio desagradable e incómodo. Sipiaguin intentó contar un chiste diplomático, pero se detuvo a medias. Marianna tenía los ojos bajos, fijos en el plato. No quería mostrar su simpatía por las palabras de Nezhdánov, no por miedo, ¡eso no!, sino porque no quería denunciarse delante de la señora Sipiaguin. Sentía sobre sí su mirada perspicaz y fija. Y realmente la señora Sipiaguin no apartó los ojos de ella y de Nezhdánov. Aquella inesperada explosión primero la asustó, pero después, en cierta manera, la comprendió, hasta al punto de exclamar involuntariamente: «¡Ah!» Adivinó de golpe que Nezhdánov se le escapaba, el mismo Nezhdánov que no hacía mucho tiempo venía obedientemente a un gesto suyo. «Algo pasó... ¿Será Marianna? Sí, claro que es Marianna... El le agrada... sí, y ella...»

«Hay que tomar medidas.» Así concluyó sus reflexiones, mientras Kaloméitsev se encendía de indignación. Incluso jugando a las cartas, dos horas después, pronunciaba las palabras: «¡Paso!» y «¡Compro!» con un dolor en el corazón, y en su voz se notaba un temblor de orgullo herido, aunque diera a entender que «estaba por encima» de esas nimiedades. Sólo Sipiaguin se sentía satisfecho de su elocuencia así como de haber calmado la tempestad que se había levantado... Sabía latín, y la frase de Virgilio Quos *ergo!* (¡Aquí estoy!) no le era extraña. Nose comparó conscientemente a Neptuno, pero pensó en él con cierta simpatía.

Comentario [Librodot-82]: Se refiere al poeta P. A. Viázemski (1792-1878). Dé 1856 a 1858 Viázemski dirigió la censura y se hizo notar por su extrema agresividad contra el movimiento democrático. Cuando Viázemski murió, Turguénev le discribió, en una carta a Ánnenkov, de esta manera: «Un residuo de la época de Pushkin -un residuo en el patio-, así quedará en la memoria de la posteridad, si es que le recordarán.» (Crónica de la vida y obra de I.S. Turguénev *(Létopis' zhizni i tvórchestva I. S. Turguéneva],* Academia, 1934, pág. 273.) En una carta a Gogol, Belinski llamó a Viázemski «príncipe en la aristocracia y lacayo en la literatura.

XV

TAN pronto como le fue posible, Nezhdánov se retiró a su habitación encerrándose con llave. No quería ver a nadie, a nadie, excepto a Marianna, cuya habitación estaba al final del largo pasillo que cruzaba todo el último piso. Nezhdánov sólo había estado allí una vez y durante pocos minutos, pero le pareció que a la muchacha no le importaría si la llamara a la

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puerta, que ella desearía también hablarle. Era ya muy tarde, casi las diez. Los señores de la casa, después de lo ocurrido durante la cena, consideraron necesario dejarle en paz y siguieron jugando a las cartas con Kaloméitsev. Valentina Mijáilovna preguntó una o dos veces por Marianna, ya que ésta también había desaparecido inmediatamente después de cenar.

-¿Dónde está Marianna Vikéntievna? -preguntó ella, primero en ruso, después en francés, sin dirigirse a nadie en especial, sino a las paredes, como hacen a menudo las personas cuando están muy sorprendidas. Pero no tardó en embreñarse en el juego.

Nezhdánov caminó algunas veces hacia atrás y hacia adelante en su cuarto, después se dirigió por el pasillo hasta la puerta de Marianna, y llamó suavemente. No hubo respuesta. Llamó una vez más, giró el pomo de la puerta... Estaba cerrada. Apenas tuvo tiempo de volver a su habitación y sentarse, cuando en su propia puerta se oyó un leve golpe y la voz de Marianna:

-Alexéi Dmítrich, ¿fue *usted* quien vino a mi cuarto?

Él dio un salto y corrió hacia la puerta. Marianna estaba en el pasillo con una vela en la mano, pálida e inmóvil.

-Sí... yo... -murmuró.

-Venga -respondió ella, y siguió por el corredor.

Pero no llegó hasta el final sino que se paró ante una puerta baja y empujó. Nezhdánov vio una pequeña sala casi vacía-. Quedémonos mejor aquí, Alexéi Dmítrich, donde nadie nos molestará.

Nezhdánov obedeció. Marianna colocó el candelabro en el alféizar de una pequeña ventana y se volvió hacia Nezhdánov.

-Comprendo que me quisiera ver -empezó ella-. Le es muy duro vivir en esta casa y a mí también.

-Sí, quería verla, Marianna Vikéntievna -respondió Nezhdánov-, pero desde que la conocí ya no me parece tan duro vivir aquí.

Marianna sonrió pensativamente.

_Gracias, Alexéi Dmítrich. Pero dígame, ¿piensa realmente quedarse después de todos aquellos ultrajes?

-Creo que no me querrán tener más aquí. ¡Me echarán! -respondió Nezhdánov.

-Pero ¿no piensa usted mismo marcharse?

¿Yo...? No.

-Pero ¿por qué?

-¿Quiere saber por qué? Porque *usted* está aquí. Marianna bajó la cabeza y se alejó un poco hacia el fondo de la sala.

-Además -prosiguió Nezhdánov-, yo *tengo que* quedarme. Usted no sabe nada, pero yo quiero, siento que debo contárselo todo -se acercó a Marianna y le cogió la mano. Ella no la retiró, sólo le miró directamente a la cara-. ¡Oiga! -exclamó en un arranque súbito y fuerte-. ¡Óigame!

Y en seguida, sin sentarse en ninguna de las dos o tres sillas que había en la sala, siguiendo de pie ante Marianna y cogiéndole la mano, Nezhdánov, con entusiasmo, con calor, con una elocuencia que le sorprendió a él mismo, la puso al corriente de todos sus planes, intenciones, de sus motivos para aceptar la oferta de Sipiaguin, de todas sus relaciones, conocimientos, de su pasado, de todo lo que siempre había ocultado y que nunca había contado a nadie. Le habló de las cartas de

Vasili Nikoláievich, de todo... ¡hasta de Silin! Habló apresuradamente, sin parar, sin una sola pausa, como censurándose de no haber hasta entonces confiado a Marianna todos sus secretos, como si le estuviera pidiendo perdón. Ella le escuchaba atentamente, con avidez. En los primeros momentos, estaba agitada... pero esa reacción en seguida desapareció. Gratitud, orgullo, devoción, resolución, era lo que inundaba su alma. En su rostro, los ojos le centelleaban. Puso la otra mano sobre la de Nezhdánov, sus labios se abrieron en éxtasis... Estaba, de repente, terriblemente bella.

El calló por fin, la miró y, de golpe, fue como si viera por primera vez *aquel* rostro, que

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le era a la vez tan querido y tan familiar.

Dejó escapar un suspiro fuerte, hondo.

-¡Ah, qué bien he hecho en contárselo todo! -dijeron con dificultad sus labios.

-Sí, hizo bien... ¡hizo bien! -repitió ella, también con un murmullo. Imitándole involuntariamente, bajó su tono de voz-. Y significa -continuó ella-, que yo estoy a vuestra disposición, que yo quiero también ser útil a vuestra causa, que estoy dispuesta a hacer todo lo que sea necesario, a ir donde me digan, que siempre quise con ansia, con toda mi alma, eso que...

Se calló. Una palabra más y sus emociones se transformarían en lágrimas. Toda su fuerza se volvió de golpe, blanda como la cera. Una sed de actividad, de sacrificio, de sacrificio inmediato, era lo que la atormentaba.

Se oyó el sonido de unos pasos junto a la puerta, cautelosos, rápidos, leves.

Marianna se enderezó súbitamente, liberó las manos, y toda ella cambió y se alegró. Una expresión desdeñosa, audaz, le pasó por el rostro.

-Sé quién está en este momento escuchándonos detrás de la puerta -dijo ella en una voz tan alta que en el pasillo se podían oír perfectamente todas sus palabras-. La señora Sipiaguin escucha... Pero me da igual.

El ruido de pasos se interrumpió.

-¿Entonces? -preguntó Marianna a Nezhdánov-. ¿Qué podré hacer yo? ¿Cómo los ayudaré? Diga... ¡diga de prisa! ¿Qué podré hacer?

-¿Qué? -respondió Nezhdánov-. Aún no lo sé... Recibí una carta de Markélov...

¿Cuándo? ¿Cuándo?

-Esta misma tarde. Mañana tenemos que ir a la fábrica para hablar con Solomin.

-Sí... sí... ¡Qué hombre tan magnífico, Markélov! ¡Un verdadero amigo!

¿Cómo yo?

Marianna miró a Nezhdánov frente a frente.

-No... no es lo mismo.

-¿Cómo?

Ella se alejó de repente.

-¡Ah! ¿No sabe en lo que se ha convertido para mí y lo que siento en este momento?...

El corazón de Nezhdánov latió con fuerza y miró involuntariamente al suelo. Aquella muchacha que le quería -a él, un miserable sin hogar-, que había confiado en él, que estaba preparada para seguirle, para acompañarle en la misma causa, aquella muchacha maravillosa, Marianna, en aquel momento se hizo para Nezhdánov la encamación del amor de madre, de hermana, de esposa, la encarnación de su país, de la felicidad, de la lucha, de la libertad.

Levantó la cabeza y miró a sus ojos, fijos en él como en una apelación...

¡Oh, cómo le penetraba en lo hondo de su alma aquella mirada brillante, tierna!

-Así, pues -empezó él con la voz temblorosa-, mañana voy... Y cuando vuelva, le... contaré -de pronto sintió inadecuado tratar a Marianna de "usted"-. Le contaré lo que sepa, lo que se haya decidido. De hoy en adelante, todo lo que haga, todo lo que piense, todo... te... lo contaré antes.

-¡Oh, amigo mío! -exclamó Marianna cogiéndole de nuevo la mano-. ¡Yo te prometo también lo mismo!

Este "tú" salió de ella tan suave y simple como si fueran viejos camaradas.

-¿Puedo ver la carta?

-Aquí está.

Marianna pasó los ojos por la hoja de papel y después alzó el rostro con una expresión casi reverente. -¿Te confían misiones tan importantes?

El sonrió como respuesta y metió de nuevo la carta en su bolsillo.

-Es extraño -dijo él-, hemos declarado nuestro amor uno por el otro, nos amamos, pero no dijimos una sola palabra sobre ello.

¿Para qué? -murmuró Marianna.

Y, de repente, se echó a sus brazos, apretó la cabeza contra su hombro... Pero no se

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besaron -habría sido demasiado vulgar- y luego se despidieron, apretándose las manos con fuerza.

Marianna se giró para coger el candelabro que había quedado en el alféizar de la ventana, y sólo entonces una especie de confusión empezó a dominarla. Apagó la vela y, entre la profunda oscuridad, se deslizó rápidamente por el pasillo, entró en su habitación, se desnudó y se acostó en la, en cierta manera para ella, consoladora oscuridad.

XVI

A la mañana siguiente, cuando se despertó, Nezhdánov no sólo no sintió ningún embarazo al recordar lo que había pasado el día anterior, sino que, por el contrario, estaba dominado por una especie de alegría dulce y calma, como si hubiera hecho algo que, realmente, debía de haber hecho mucho antes. Después de pedir dos días de permiso a Sipiaguin, que éste le concedió inmediatamente, aunque con un aire severo, Nezhdánov se marchó a casa de Markélov.

Antes de irse consiguió encontrarse con Marianna. Tampoco ella se sentía avergonzada ni agitada. Le miró tranquila y decidida y le trató con naturalidad de "tú". Sólo estaba preocupada por lo que pasaría en casa de Markélov y le pidió que le explicara todo después.

-¡Claro! -respondió Nezhdánov.

«Y realmente», pensó, «¿por qué tenemos que preocuparnos? En nuestras relaciones, los sentimientos personales desempeñan un papel... secundario... y estamos unidos para siempre. ¿En nombre de la causa? Sí, en nombre de la causa.»

Así pensaba Nezhdánov y ni él mismo sospechaba cuánto había de verdadero -y de falso- en ese pensamiento.

Encontró a Markélov en el mismo estado de ánimo, agotado y deprimido. Almorzaron apresuradamente y, montados en nuestro ya conocido carruaje (el segundo caballo era un potro joven de un mujik, que nunca había sido acoplado antes, pues el caballo de Markélov aún estaba cojo), se fueron camino de la gran fábrica de tejidos del comerciante Faléiev, donde vivía Solomin. La curiosidad de Nezhdánov se había despertado: ansiaba conocer íntimamente al hombre de quien tanto había oído hablar en los últimos días. Solomin había sido informado de la llegada de los dos hombres y, en seguida que se detuvieron en el portalón de la fábrica y se hicieron anunciar, fueron conducidos a un edificio horrible ocupado por el "director técnico". Él estaba en el bloque principal, y mientras uno de los obreros corría a llamarle, Nezhdánov y Markélov se acercaron a la ventana y miraron alrededor. La fábrica, según parecía, estaba en pleno desarrollo con gran intensidad de trabajo; de todos lados llegaba el ruido propio de una actividad incesante: máquinas que soplaban y golpeaban, telares que producían estrépito, ruedas que crujían, correas que giraban, mientras carretas y cilindros y carros cargados rodaban por todas partes. Se daban órdenes a gritos entre el sonido de campanillas y silbidos; obreros con blusas y delantales cubriéndoles el pecho, el pelo atadocon cintas, y muchachas obreras con ropas de imprenta, corrían rápidamente de un lado a otro; caballos enganchados eran arriados... Un millar de seres humanos trabajaba alrededor, intensamente. Todo sucedía a gran velocidad y con bastante sentido; pero no sólo no había limpieza y precisión, sino que no se notaba el menor vestigio de orden. Por el contrario, por todas partes les sorprendía la negligencia, la basura, la suciedad: aquí un cristal roto en una ventana, allí el estuco caído, las tablas sueltas, más adelante las puertas abiertas. Una gran charca negra, con los colores iridiscentes de la suciedad, estaba en medio del patio principal; más adelante, un montón de ladrillos abandonados; restos de esteras, cajas y trozos de cartón estaban esparcidos aquí y allá; perros magros y sucios con aire hambriento erraban por allí sin siquiera ladrar; en un rincón, bajo una cerca, estaba sentado un chiquillo de unos cuatro años, con un enorme vientre y la cabeza despeinada, llorando desesperadamente como si hubiera sido abandonado por todo el mundo; a su lado, toda sucia también de hollín, una puerca,

rodeada de una confusión de lechones, engullía tallos de col; algunas ropas rasgadas estaban tendidas en una cuerda; y ¡cuánta basura y mal olor por todos lados! Era una fábrica rusa, sin ningún tipo de semejanza con una fábrica alemana o francesa.

Nezhdánov miró a Markélov.

-Oí hablar tanto de las capacidades de Solomin -empezó él-, que confieso que me sorprende todo este desorden. No me esperaba esto.

-Esto no es desorden -respondió Markélov melancólicamente-, sino la habitual falta de limpieza rusa. Sin embargo, es un negocio de millones. Y él tiene que adaptarse a los viejos hábitos, a la práctica de las cosas, y al propio amo. ¿Se hace alguna idea de Faléiev?

-Ninguna.

-Es el mayor avaro de Moscú. Un burgués, en resumen.

En ese momento entró Solomin. Nezhdánov quedó

tan desilusionado con él como con la fábrica. A primera vista, Solomin parecía un finlandés, o mejor, un sueco. Era alto, de pelo color de estopa, delgado, de hombros anchos; tenía el rostro largo, amarillento, nariz corta y ancha, ojos muy pequeños, verduscos, una expresión plácida, labios gruesos y salientes, dientes blancos, también grandes, y con el mentón partido, cubierto de vello largo. Vestía como un mecánico o un fogonero: una vieja chaqueta de bolsillos caídos, en la cabeza un sombrero de hule, en el cuello un pañuelo de lana y botas alquitranadas en los pies. Le acompañaba un hombre de cerca de cuarenta años con una simple chaqueta de campesino; su rostro era extraordinariamente vivo, como un gitano, de ojos penetrantes y muy negros, con los que examinó a Nezhdánov tan pronto como entró... Ya conocía a Markélov. Era Pável, el *factotum* de Solomin.

Comentario [Librodot-83]: Finlandia era entonces parte del imperio ruso.

Solomin se aproximó, sin prisas, a los dos visitantes, les estrechó la mano en silencio, con su mano dura y huesuda, quitó de la mesa un paquete sellado y lo pasó, también en silencio, a Pável, que salió de inmediato. Después se estiró, gruñó, se quitó el sombrero con un gesto de la mano, se sentó en un banco de madera pintada y, señalando un sofá a Markélov y Nezhdánov, pidió:

-¡Por favor!

Markélov presentó primero Solomin a Nezhdánov, quien le apretó de nuevo la mano. Después, Markélov empezó a hablar inmediatamente de "sus asuntos", mencionando la carta de Vasili Nikoláievich. Nezhdánov la entregó a Solomin. Y mientras éste la leía atenta y lentamente, moviendo los ojos de linea en línea, Nezhdánov le observaba. Solomin estaba cerca de la ventana; el sol, ya bajo, le brillaba en el rostro tiznado, ligeramente cubierto de transpiración, el polvo que cubría su rubio pelo lo hacía fulgurar como una masa de oro. Las ventanas de la nariz le temblaban y se le distendían mientras leía, y sus labios se movían como si estuvieran formando cada palabra; cogía la carta con fuerza y la sostenía con las dos manos. Todo ello, no se sabe por qué, agradó a Nezhdánov. Solomin le entregó la carta, sonrió, y de nuevo empezó a escuchar a Markélov. Éste habló, habló y, finalmente, se calló.

-Bueno empezó Solomin, y su voz levemente ronca pero joven y fuerte también agradó a Nezhdánov-, aquí no estamos muy cómodos. ¿Por qué no vamos a su casa, que no dista más de unas siete verstas? ¿Han venido con el carruaje?

-Sí.

-Bien... habrá lugar para mí. Dentro de una hora terminaré mi trabajo y estaré libre. Podremos hablar a placer. ¿También está libre? dijo dirigiéndose a Nezhdánov.

-Hasta pasado mañana.

-Magnífico. ¿Podremos pasar la noche en su casa, Serguéi Mijáilich?

-¡Qué pregunta! Sin duda.

-Bueno. Dentro de un momento estaré listo. Sólo voy a arreglarme un poco.

-¿Y cómo van las cosas en su fábrica? -preguntó Markélov significativamente.

Solomin miró al otro lado.

-Hablaremos después -dijo por segunda vez-. Esperen un momento... no tardo... Olvidé una cosa.

Salió. Si no hubiese causado tan buena impresión en Nezhdánov, éste habría pensado y

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hasta, quizá, hubiera preguntado a Markélov: »¿No estará volviéndose atrás?» Pero nada de esto le pasó por la cabeza.

Una hora después, en el momento en que, de todos los pisos del enorme edificio, por todas las escaleras y puertas, irrumpía una multitud ruidosa de obreros, el carruaje donde seguían Markélov, Nezhdánov y Solomin salió a la carretera.

-¡Vasili Fedótych! ¿Adelante? -gritó Pável a Solomin. acompañándolo hasta el portalón.

-No, espera... -respondió Solomin-. Es sobre una tarea nocturna explicó a sus compañeros.

Llegaron a Borziónkov, cenaron -más bien por cortesía-, y, después de encender unos puros, empezaron una discusión, una de esas interminables discusiones nocturnas rusas, que por su intensidad y tamaño son raras en cualquier otro pueblo. Sin embargo, Solomin no justificó las esperanzas de Nezhdánov. Habló significativamente poco... tan poco que casi se podía decir que estuvo callado. Pero escuchaba atentamente, y siempre que daba cualquier opinión o hacía alguna observación, lo hacia con mucha eficiencia, seriedad y brevedad. Ocurría que Solomin no creía que la revolución se produjera pronto en Rusia; aunque no quería aceptar las opiniones de los otros, no buscaba tampoco imponerles las suyas, pero no impedía que lo intentaran. Conocía bien a los revolucionarios de San Petersburgo y, hasta cierto punto estaba de acuerdo con ellos; pero él mismo venía del pueblo y comprendía bien esa gran masa, sin la que "nada se puede hacer" y a la que es preciso preparar de manera diferente y para fines distintos de las otras clases. Por eso, prefería quedar ajeno, no por astucia o subterfugio, sino porque, como hombre vulgar con ideas propias, no quería arruinarse a sí mismo y a los otros en vano. Pero escuchar... no le importaba, e incluso podía aprender, si era posible. Solomin era hijo único de un diácono y tenía cinco hermanas, todas casadas con curas y diáconos. Pero él, con el asentimiento del padre, un hombre muy calmo y sobrio, abandonó el seminario, fue a estudiar matemáticas y empezó a gustarle particularmente la mecánica. Entró entonces en la fábrica de un inglés que empezó a apreciarlo como a un hijo y le dio medios para ir a Manchester, donde estuvo dos años y aprendió inglés. Había entrado poco antes en la fábrica del comerciante de Moscú y, aunque fuera exigente con sus subordinados -porque en Inglaterra había aprendido esas maneras-, estos le apreciaban y le trataban como a uno de los suyos. Su padre estabamuy contento, decía que era "un muchacho muy majo" y sólo le entristecía que el hijo no quisiera casarse.

Durante la discusión nocturna en casa de Markélov, Solomin, como ya dijimos, estuvo casi siempre callado; pero cuando Markélov empezó a hablar de las esperanzas que ponían en los obreros de la fábrica, Solomin, con su aire vulgar, observó lacónicamente, que en Rusia los obreros no podían compararse a los extranjeros... eran una gente demasiado dócil.

-¿Y los mujiks? -preguntó Markélov.

-¿Los mujiks? Hoy día hay bastantes usureros entre ellos y cada vez habrá más... y esos sólo velan por sus intereses. Los otros son carneros, ignorantes.

-Entonces ¿hacia dónde hemos de dirigirnos? Solomin sonrió.

-Buscad y encontraréis.

Estaba casi siempre sonriendo, pero su sonrisa era también, en cierta manera, ingenua, aunque no sencilla como todo él. Con Nezhdánov se comportaba de una manera peculiar: el joven estudiante le despertaba simpatía, casi ternura.

Durante la discusión, Nezhdánov empezó de golpe a hablar muy excitado; Solomin se levantó calmosamente y, cruzando toda la sala con sus largos pasos, cerró la ventana que estaba abierta por encima mismo de la cabeza de Nezhdánov.

-Podría constiparse -observó, en respuesta a la mirada sorprendida del orador.

Nezhdánov empezó a hacerle preguntas sobre sus experiencias socialistas en la fábrica y si había hecho algo para que los obreros tuvieran participación en los beneficios.

-¡Mi querido amigo! -respondió Solomin-. Abrimos una escuela y un pequeño hospital. Sólo por eso, el amo pataleó como un oso.

Solomin solamente se enfureció una vez, cuando se enteró de una injusticia legal sobre la supresión de una asociación de obreros, y golpeó con el puño cerrado en la mesa, con lo

que hizo estremecer todo lo que se encontraba encima, incluyendo un peso de veinte kilos que estaba al lado del tintero.

Cuando Nezhdánov y Markélov empezaron a discutir como debían "empezar", como debían ejecutar los planes, Solomin siguió escuchando con curiosidad, incluso con respeto, pero no dijo nada. La conversación duró hasta las cuatro de la mañana. Discutieron de todo. Markélov también habló misteriosamente de los incansables viajes de Kisliakov, de sus cartas, que eran cada vez más interesantes; prometió mostrarlas a Nezhdánov e incluso dejar que se llevara algunas a casa, pues eran muy largas y escritas en una letra ilegible. En ellas había mucha cultura y hasta versos, no de tipo frívolo sino con una orientación socialista. De Kisliakov, Markélov pasó al ejército, a los ayudantes de campo, a los alemanes y, finalmente, también a sus artículos sobre la artillería. Nezhdánov se refirió a los antagonismos entre Heine y Börne, a Prudhon, al realismo en el Arte, y Solomin escuchaba, escuchaba, intentaba comprender, fumaba, y nunca dejaba de sonreír. Sin pronunciar una sola palabra, parecía haber comprendido mejor que todos donde residía la dificultad esencial.

Comentario [Librodot-84]: En 1840 Heinrich Heine publicó un ensayo sobre *Ludwig Börne,* en lo que discutía la posición sobre el arte y la política de ese crítico y ridiculizaba la fraseología seudorevolucionaria de sus seguidores. La réplica de Nezhdánov era sin duda resultado de la publicación reciente (1867) del artículo *Heinrich Heine,* de D.I. Písarev, parte del cual era un análisis de la disputa entre Heine y Börne.

Dieron las cuatro... Nezhdánov y Markélov apenas se sostenían en las piernas de cansancio, pero Solomin estaba igual. Fueron a dormir, no sin antes acordar que al día siguiente irían a la ciudad a ver al Viejo Creyente, el comerciante Golushkin, con fines de propaganda. Ese Golushkin era muy entusiasta, y ¡había prometido prosélitos! Solomin expresó la duda de si valdría la pena visitar a Golushkin, pero finalmente estuvo de acuerdo.

XVII

LOS huéspedes de Markélov aún dormían cuando un mensajero llegó con una carta de la hermana de aquél, la señora Sipiaguin. En dicha carta, Valentina Mijáilovna le hablaba de varias cosas domésticas, le pedía que le devolviera un libro que se había llevado prestado y, además, en la postdata, le informaba de una "divertida" noticia: su antiguo amor, Marianna, estaba enamorada del profesor Nezhdánov, y él de ella. Y no hablaba por lo que había oído, sino que ella misma lo había visto con sus propios ojos y había escuchado con sus propios oídos. El rostro de Markélov enrojeció... pero no dijo nada. Mandó devolver el libro a su hermana y, cuando vio a Nezhdánov en el umbral de la escalera, le saludó de la manera habitual, y incluso le entregó el paquete de cartas de Kisliakov que le había prometido. Pero, en lugar de quedarse y hablar con él, Markélov salió a tratar asuntos de la propiedad. Nezhdánov, por su parte, volvió a su habitación y echó un vistazo a las cartas: el joven propagandista hablaba sobre todo de él mismo, de su convulsiva actividad. Según decía, el mes anterior había visitado once distritos, había estado en diez grandes ciudades, en veintinueve ciudades pequeñas, en cincuenta y tres pueblos, en una hacienda, así como en ocho fábricas; había dormido dieciséis noches en hacinas de heno, una en una caballeriza, e inclusohabía pasado una noche en una cuadra de vacas (aquí, observó *entre paréntesis,* las pulgas no le habían molestado); estuvo dentro de cabañas de adobe, y de barracas de obreros; por todas partes predicó, enseñó, distribuyó panfletos y recogió informaciones; de algunas cosas tomaba nota *in situ,* otras las guardaba en su memoria por el más moderno método de mnemónica. Había escrito catorce cartas largas, veintiocho cortas y dieciocho notas (de las que cuatro estaban escritas a lápiz, una con sangre, y otra con hollín mezclado con agua). Había conseguido hacer todo esto porque había aprendido a dividir sistemáticamente el tiempo según el método de Quintin Johnson, Sverlitskov, Karrelius y otros autores y especialistas en estadísticas. Después seguía hablando de sí mismo, de su estrella, de cómo precisamente él había completado la teoría de las pasiones de Fourier; aseguraba que había sido el primero en descubrir "los fundamentos", que "no se iría de este mundo sin dejar una huella", que él mismo se sorprendía de como él, un joven con veintidós años, había conseguido resolver todos los problemas de la vida y de la ciencia, y que transformaría Rusia, ¡que la "sacudiría"! «*Dixi*», añadía al final del parágrafo. Esta palabra, "Dixi", aparecía a menudo en las cartas de

Comentario [Librodot-85]: Citación incorrecta del poema *Meditación [Duma],* de Lérmontov.

Comentario [Librodot-86]: He dicho

Librodot

Kisliakov y siempre con dos signos de exclamación. En una de las cartas había algunos poemas socialistas, dirigidos a una muchacha. Empezaban con las palabras:

No me ames a mí, sino a la idea!

Nezhdánov estaba asombrado no tanto por el egocentrismo de Kisliakov, como por la honesta simplicidad de Markélov... pero pensó: «¡Estética! Y sin embargo, el señor Kisliakov puede sernos útil.» Los tres amigos se reunieron para el té matinal, pero la conversación de la noche anterior no se renovó. Ninguno de ellos quería hablar, pero Solomin era el único que estaba callado tranquilamente. Tanto Nezhdánov como Markélov parecían íntimamente agitados.

Después de tomar el té marcharon a la ciudad; el viejo siervo de Markélov, sentado en el peldaño que daba a la puerta, acompañó al antiguo barin con su habitual mirada triste.

Golushkin, a quien querían presentar Nezhdánov, era hijo de un rico comerciante de droguería, un Viejo Creyente de la secta de Teodosio. No había aumentado la fortuna dejada por su padre, porque era, como se acostumbra a decir, un juerguista, un epicúreo a la manera rusa, y no tenía la más mínima habilidad para el comercio. Era un hombre de alrededor de cuarenta años, bastante gordo y feo, picado de viruelas, con los ojos pequeños como los de un puerco. Hablaba muy deprisa como si mezclase las palabras y hacía gestos con las manos, movía las piernas, reía por todo... Por lo general daba la impresión de ser un egoísta estúpido, disoluto y petulante. Se consideraba a sí mismo un hombre educado porque vestía a la manera alemana y porque vivía, aunque sin gran aseo, en una casa abierta, convivía con gente rica, iba al teatro y protegía a algunas artistas de variedades, con las que conversaba en una lengua muy extraña que pretendía ser francés. Su principal pasión era la sed de popularidad: «¡Que el nombre de Golushkin suene en todo el mundo! Si fue así con Suvórov y Potiómkin, ¿por qué no puede pasar lo mismo con Kapitón Golushkin?» Había sido precisamente este deseo, dominando su avaricia innata, lo que le lanzó, como él mismo decía no sin cierto orgullo, hacia la oposición (antes decía simplemente `"posición", pero después aprendió), y le puso en contacto con los nihilistas: apoyaba las opiniones más extremas, se burlaba de su fe de Viejo Creyente, comía carne en los ayunos, jugaba a las cartas y bebía champán como si fuera agua. Y nunca había tenido problemas porque, según decía, siempre que era necesario, sobornaba a las autoridades: todos los agujeros se cosen, todas las bocas se cierran, todos los oídos se tapan. Era viudo, sin hijos; los hijos de su hermana giraban con trepidación, servilmente, alrededor suyo... pero él les llamaba tontos ignorantes, bárbaros, y raramente les miraba. Vivía en una gran casa de piedra bastante mal conservada. Algunas de las habitaciones estaban amuebladas a la extranjera, pero en otras sólo había algunos bancos pintados y un sofá con cubierta de hule. Había cuadros por todas partes, bastante mediocres todos; paisajes de color de sangre, marinas moradas, "El Beso" de Moller, mujeres gordas desnudas con las rodillas rojas. Aunque Golushkin no tenía familia, tenía muchos criados y parásitos bajo el mismo techo: y si los recibía no era por generosidad, sino sólo por su deseo de ser popular y tener a alguien a quien mandar y ante quien poder darse aires de grandeza. «Mis clientes», decía, cuando quería engañar a alguien. No leía libros, pero tenia una excelente memoria para citar frases cortas.

Los tres amigos fueron a buscar a Golushkin a su despacho. Envuelto en una bata larga, con un puro en la boca, fingía que leía el periódico. Al verlos dio un salto, echó a correr, se ruborizó, gritó que trajeran deprisa unas tapas, les hizo algunas preguntas, rió sin ningún motivo, y todo al mismo tiempo. Ya conocía a Markélov y a Solomin pero no a Nezhdánov. Cuando supo que era estudiante, rió de nuevo y exclamó:

-¡Magnífico! ¡Magnífico! Nuestras fuerzas se unen... La cultura es la luz, la ignorancia es la oscuridad... Yo mismo tuve una pésima educación, pero comprendo lo que pasa, y por eso mismo digo: ¡adelante!

Nezhdánov tuvo la sensación de que el señor Golushkin era tímido y confuso... y no se equivocaba realmente. «Cuidado, ¡amigo Kapitón! ¡No seas irreflexivo entus opiniones!», era su primer pensamiento al ver una cara nueva. Sin embargo, volvió en sí rápidamente y, de la

Comentario [Librodot-87]: Título de un poema del estudiante de medicina V. G. Dejteriov, que Turguénev leyó en un manuscrito. A mediados de 1874, A. P. Filosofa entregó a Turguénev una carpeta con diarios, cartas y poemas «de jóvenes», entre los que se encontraba el manuscrito de Dejteriov. A. P. Filosofa pensaba que esos poemas y cartas reflejaban a los mejores representantes de la juventud progresista. Turguénev no estaba de acuerdo con ella.

Comentario [Librodot-88]: La casa rusa tradicional *(isba)* de las clases pobres no tenía ventanas o las tenía muy pequeñas, era casi completamente cerrada para conservar el calor.

Comentario [Librodot-89]: Militar ruso que se distinguió durante la guerra contra Napoleón.

Comentario [Librodot-90]: Político y militar, favorito de Caterina II, impulsor de la política de expansión rusa en Crimea. En Europa es costumbre escribir su nombre: Potemkin.

Librodot

misma forma apresurada, tartamudeante y confusa, empezó a hablar de Vasili Nikoláievich, de su carácter y de la necesidad de pro...pa...ganda (conocía esta palabra muy bien, pero la pronunciaba lentamente). Dijo que él, Golushkin, había descubierto un nuevo elemento, que le parecía que se acercaba el momento del... del bisturí (al decir esto miró a Markélov, pero este no movió ni siquiera una ceja). Después, dirigiéndose a Nezhdánov, empezó a hablar de sí mismo en términos no menos grandiosos que las cartas de Kisliakov, que desde hacía mucho tiempo había dejado de ser un tirano estúpido, que reconocía plenamente los derechos del proletariado (recordaba muy bien esta palabra), que, si él mismo había abandonado el comercio y sólo se dedicaba a operaciones bancarias -para aumentar su capital-, era sólo para que ese capital, en un determinado momento, pudiera ser utilizado... utilizado por la causa, por decirlo de alguna manera, por el pueblo, porque él, Golushkin, realmente detestaba el capital. Entonces entró un hombre con las tapas y Golushkin tosió significativamente y preguntó si no querían tomar un chatito. El fue el primero en "engullir", de una manera impresionante, un vaso de aguardiente de pimienta.

Los invitados se sirvieron también. Golushkin se echaba a la boca grandes trozos de caviar y bebía sin pausa, diciendo de vez en cuando: «¡Por favor, señores, vamos, un poco de Macon!» Volviéndose de nuevo hacia Nezhdánov, le preguntó de donde había venido, dónde estaba ahora y cuánto tiempo hacía. Cuando supo que estaba en casa de Sipiaguin, exclamó:

-¡Conozco bien a ese barin! ¡Totalmente vacío!

Y empezó inmediatamente a insultar a todos los propietarios de la provincia porque no sólo no tenían espíritu cívico, sino que ni siquiera comprendían cuáles eran sus verdaderos intereses... A pesar de los insultos, únicamente sus ojos se movían sin parar, de un modo muy extraño. Nezhdánov no podía darle ninguna respuesta y no sabía lo que pretendía él. Como de costumbre, Solomin estaba callado y Markélov tenía una expresión tan triste, que Nezhdánov acabó por preguntarle qué le ocurría. Markélov respondió que no era nada, en el tono utilizado normalmente por las personas cuando quieren dar a entender que hay realmente algo pero que a nadie le importa. Golushkin empezó de nuevo a insultar a este y a aquel, y después alabó a la nueva generación: «¡Qué tíos más listos!», dijo, «¡Lis-tos!» Solomin le interrumpió para informarse sobre el joven prometedor de que había hablado y dónde lo había descubierto. Golushkin rió, repitió una o dos veces: «¡Ya lo verá! ¡Ya lo verá!» Y empezó a hacerle preguntas sobre la fábrica y sobre el "estafador" que no era otro que su propietario, a lo que Solomin respondió con monosílabos. Entonces Golushkin sirvió champán a todos y, acercándose al oído de Nezhdánov, murmuró: «¡A la república!» y vació el vaso de un trago. Nezhdánov apenas probó nada. Solomin dijo que por la mañana nunca bebía; Markélov, enfadado, vació hasta la última gota todo su vaso. Parecía impaciente:

-Estamos todos perdiendo el tiempo aquí y no hablamos de lo que realmente nos interesa... -golpeó la mesa con la mano y exclamó severamente-: ¡Señores! -y empezó a hablar.

Justo en aquel momento entró un hombre adulador, con cuello de jarro y aire de tuberculoso, vestía un traje de comerciante en nanquín y dos orejas muy largas. Hizo una reverencia a toda la compañía y musitó algo al oído de Golushkin.

Comentario [Librodot-91]: En la Rusia del siglo XIX, los comerciantes *(kuptsy)* formaban una clase que se distinguía por la manera particular de vestir así como por sus enormes barbas y el peinado, que consistía en una crencha que dividía el pelo en dos mitades.

-¡Voy en seguida, voy en seguida! -respondió éste apresuradamente-. Señores -exclamó-, tengo que pedirles disculpas... Mi empleado Vasia acaba de contarme "algo" -Golushkin se expresó así en un tono de broma- que exige absolutamente que les deje. Pero espero, señores, que puedan venir a almorzar hoy conmigo... a las tres. Entonces estaremos mucho más cómodos.

Ni Solomin ni Nezhdánov sabían qué responder, pero Markélov dijo en seguida, con la misma severidad en el rostro y en la voz:

-Claro que sí. Pero ¿qué comedia es ésta?

-Muchas gracias -se apresó a decir Golushkin. Y, haciendo una reverencia a Markélov, añadió-: de todos modos, daré mil rublos para la causa... de eso pueden estar seguros.

Y, con estas palabras, agitó la mano derecha tres veces, con el dedo meñique y el pulgar tiesos.

Librodot

-¡Pueden confiar en mí!

Acompañó a los huéspedes a la puerta y, quedándose en el umbral, gritó:

-¡Les espero a las tres!

-¡De acuerdo! -Markélov fue el único que contestó.

-Señores -dijo Solomin, cuando se encontraron en la calle-. Voy a coger un carruaje y vuelvo a la fábrica. ¿Qué podemos hacer hasta la hora del almuerzo? ¿Perder el tiempo? Y en cuanto a nuestro comerciante... me parece que de él se puede decir que, como la conocida cabra... ¡no da leche ni lana!

-Dará lana -observó tristemente Markélov-. Nos prometió dinero. ¿O a usted no le gusta? Las personas no vienen tras nosotros. No podemos ser muy exigentes.

-No quiero ser aguafiestas -dijo Solomin tranquilamente-. Sólo me pregunto qué utilidad puede tener mi presencia. Sin embargo -dijo mirando a Nezhdánov y sonriendo-, si lo desean, me quedaré. La buena compañía hasta en la muerte es agradable.

Markélov levantó la cabeza.

-Mientras, podemos ir al jardín de la ciudad. Hace buen tiempo. Siempre se ve gente.

-Vamos.

Empezaron a caminar; Markélov y Solomin adelante, Nezhdánov atrás.

XVIII

EL estado anímico de Nezhdánov era extraño. En los últimos dos días, tantas sensaciones nuevas, tantas caras nuevas... Por primera vez en su vida había entrado en contacto íntimo con una muchacha, que -con toda probabilidad- amaba. Estaba presente en el inicio de un movimiento al que -con toda probabilidad- dedicaría todas sus fuerzas... ¿Y qué? ¿Estaba satisfecho? No. ¿Vacilaba? ¿Tenía miedo? ¿Estaba confuso? Oh, ¡claro que no! ¿Sentía por lo menos, en todo su ser, aquella tensión, aquel ansia de estar al frente, en las primeras filas de la lucha, que se produce cuando se acerca la batalla? Tampoco. ¿Creía realmente en su causa? ¿Creía en su amor? «Oh, ¡maldito esteta! ¡Escéptico!, susurraron sus labios de una manera inaudible. Entonces ¿por qué este cansancio, este desánimo, incluso a la hora de hablar, excepto si no era para gritar de rabia? ¿Qué voz íntima quería sofocar con esos gritos? Pero Marianna, esa muchacha deliciosa y fiel camarada, esa alma digna y enamorada, esa maravillosa muchacha, ¿no le quería realmente? ¿No era efectivamente grande aquella felicidad que había encontrado en ella? ¿No merecía su amistad y su amor? Y aquellos dos seres que iban ahora delante de él, Markélov, Solomin, que aún conocía tan poco, pero por los que se sentía tan atraído; ¿no eran excelentes tipos del pueblo ruso, de la vida rusa, y no era sólo de por sí una felicidad conocerles y ser íntimo de ellos? Entonces ¿por qué aquella sensación vaga, intranquila y atormentadora? ¿Por qué aquella tristeza? Siendo un soñador tan melancólico -susurraron de nuevo sus labios- ¿qué especie de revolucionario podría ser él? Lo que debía hacer era escribir versos, estar amargado, cultivar sus manías psicológicas y sutilezas en todos los géneros, pero no confundir su irritabilidad enfermiza y nerviosa con una rabia propia de un hombre, con la furia honesta de un hombre con convicciones. Oh, Hamlet, Hamlet, príncipe de Dinamarca, ¿cómo escapar a tu sombra? ¿Cómo dejar de imitarte en todo, hasta en el propio menosprecio?

-¡Alexis! ¡Amigo! ¡Hamlet ruso! -se oyó de golpe como el eco de todos sus pensamientos. Era una voz conocida y chillona-. ¿Eres realmente tú quien está delante de mis ojos?

Comentario [Librodot-92]: Diminutivo de Alexéi.

Nezhdánov levantó la vista y, con asombro, vio, ante sí, a Paklin. Paklin vestido de pastor, con traje estival de color carne, sin corbata, con un gran sombrero de paja galoneado con una cinta azul que caía hacia atrás, y zapatos de charol.

Cojeando rápido llegó hasta Nezhdánov y le cogió la mano.

-En primer lugar -empezó él-, aunque estemos en un jardín público, en nombre de los

viejos tiempos tenemos que abrazarnos... y besarnos... ¡Uno! ¡Dos! ¡Tres! En segundo lugar debo decirte que si no te hubiera encontrado hoy, me habrías visto mañana, pues sé dónde vives y he venido a esta ciudad a propósito para verte... los detalles te los explicaré después. En tercer lugar, preséntame a tus amigos. Dime rápidamente quiénes son y diles quién soy yo, y después ¡disfrutemos de la vida!

Comentario [Librodot-93]: La salutación tradicional rusa son tres besos: uno en cada mejilla y el último en la boca.

Nezhdánov cumplió el deseo del amigo, le presentó a Markélov y Solomin y le explicó quién era cada uno de ellos, dónde vivía, qué hacía, etc.

-¡Magnífico! -exclamó Paklin-. Y ahora déjenme que les lleve lejos de la multitud, aunque también es cierto que no hay mucha gente por aquí, hacia un lugar aislado, donde acostumbro a sentarme horas y horas seguidas para contemplar la naturaleza. Tendremos allá una vista magnífica: la casa del gobernador, con dos garitas a rayas para los centinelas, tres policías y ni un solo perro. No se sorprendan, sin embargo, con la exageración de mis observaciones, con las que intento divertirles. Según mis amigos, yo simbolizo el espíritu ruso... quizá por eso mismo soy cojo.

Paklin condujo a los amigos al "lugar aislado" y les hizo sentarse, después de expulsar de allá a dos mendigos. Los jóvenes empezaron entonces a "intercambiar ideas"... una ocupación la mayoría de las veces bastante monótona -particularmente en los primeros momentos- y normalmente nada fructífera.

-¡Esperen! -gritó, de golpe, Paklin volviéndose hacia Nezhdánov-. Tengo que explicarte por qué estoy aquí. Como sabes, cada año llevo a mi hermana a cualquier sitio, y cuando supe que tú venías a estas tierras recordé que aquí viven dos personas maravillosas, marido y mujer, que son parientes nuestros... por lado materno. Mi padre era de la pequeña burguesía -(Nezhdánov ya lo sabía, pero Paklin hablaba a *los otros dos)*-pero mi madre era noble. Y hace mucho tiempo que esta gente nos invita a venir. "¡Espera!", pensé..., "Ni caídos del cielo para una ocasión como ésta. Son una gente magnífica, mi hermana será muy bien tratada. ¿Qué podríamos encontrar mejor?" Y aquí estamos. Y fue exactamente así: estamos magníficamente instalados... ¡Imposible de describir! ¡Son unas personas maravillosas! ¡Únicas! ¡Tienen que conocerles sin falta! ¿Tienen algo qué hacer? ¿Dónde van a almorzar? ¿Y por qué vinieron precisamente aquí?

-Vamos a comer con un tal Golushkin... un comerciante -respondió Nezhdánov.

-¿A qué hora?

-A las tres.

-Van a verlo a causa... a causa... -Paklin echó una mirada a Solomin, que sonreía, y a Markélov, que estaba cada vez más taciturno.

-Vamos, Aliosha, vamos, diles... haz cualquier señal masónica... diles que conmigo no son necesarios los cumplidos... Yo soy de vuestro... de vuestro partido...

-Golushkin es también de los nuestros -asintió Nezhdánov.

-Entonces ¡espléndido! Hasta las tres todavía hay mucho tiempo. Escúchenme... ¿por qué no vamos a casa de mis parientes?

-¡Vaya idea! ¿Cómo podemos nosotros así...?

-Por eso no se preocupen. Asumo toda la responsabilidad. Imaginen: ¡es un oasis! Ni política, ni literatura, nada moderno entra allá. La casita es toda achaparrada, como hoy ya no se ve en ningún sitio. Hasta el mismo olor es antiguo allá dentro, las personas son antiguas, el aire antiguo... todo lo que se toca es antiguo, Catalina II, polvo, crinolinas, siglo XVIII. Los señores de la casa... imagínense: marido y mujer, ambos muy viejos, de la misma edad, y sin una arruga, redondos, muy limpios, exactamente como dos periquitos. Y bondadosos hasta la estupidez, hasta la santidad, infinitamente. Dicen que "infinita" bondad muchas veces equivale a debilidad moral... En esas sutilezas no puedo entrar y sólo sé que mis viejecitos son la bondad personificada. Y nunca han tenido hijos, ¡benditos sean! Es así como las personas se refieren a ellos. Se visten de la misma manera, una especie de bata a rayas, de una tela tan buena, que hoy ya no se encuentra. Son exactamente iguales, sólo que uno lleva un gorro y el otro una gorra con visera, pero orlada con el mismo tipo de volantes, aunque sin cintas. Si no fuera por esas cintas no se sabría quién es quién, ya que el marido no lleva barba. Se llaman:

uno Fómushka, el otro Fímushka. Y les digo que valdría la pena pagar por verles. Se quieren hasta lo imposible, y cualquiera que los vaya a visitar es recibido con ternura.

Comentario [Librodot-94]: Diminutivo de Foma.

Comentario [Librodot-95]: Diminutivo de Efímiia o de Serafima.

Y son tan simpáticos. exhiben en seguida todas sus gracias. Sólo una cosa: no se puede fumar en su casa. No porque sean intolerantes, sino porque el tabaco les molesta... Claro, ¿quién fumaba en su tiempo? De todas maneras, no tienen canarios en casa, porque esos pájaros eran poco conocidos en esa época... Comprobarán que es una gran felicidad! ¿Entonces? ¿Vamos?

Yo, realmente, no sé -empezó Nezhdánov.

-Espera: aún no te lo he contado todo. Sus voces son absolutamente iguales: puedes cerrar los ojos y no sabes quién habló. Sólo Fómushka habla quizá más expresivamente. Ustedes están a punto de lanzarse a una gran aventura, señores, quizá una lucha terrible. Antes de arrojarse a la batalla, ¿por qué no se sumergen...?

-¿En aguas estancadas? -preguntó Markélov.

-¿Y por qué no? Estancadas, sí, precisamente, pero no pútridas. Son como las lagunas de las estepas, que también están estancadas pero nunca se pudren, porque hay fuentes en sus profundidades. Y, en mis viejecitos, hay fuentes en el fondo de sus corazones, fuentes de las más puras. La pregunta es ésta: ¿quieren saber cómo se vivía hace ciento cincuenta años? Si quieren saberlo, vengan conmigo. Pronto llegará el día y la hora -será ciertamente la misma para ambos-, que mis pequeños periquitos caerán de sus pequeñas cañas, y todo lo que es antiguo acabará junto con ellos, y la pequeña casa achaparrada se desmoronará, y en su lugar habrá aquello que, como decía mi abuela, siempre hay en el lugar donde hubo "humanos", o sea: espinas, cardos, carcoma y ortigas. La misma calle dejará de existir, otra gente vendrá y ya nada como aquello se verá jamás por los siglos de los siglos...

-¿Entonces? exclamó Nezhdánov-. ¿Vamos?

-Con el mayor placer -añadió Solomin-. Este tipo de cosas no están muy de acuerdo conmigo, pero será curioso, y si el señor Paklin puede asegurarnos que nuestra visita no molestará a nadie, en ese caso... ¿por qué no?...

-Por eso podéis estar tranquilos -exclamó, a su turno, Paklin-. Estarán encantados de verles... y nada más. No es necesario hacer cumplidos. Les he dicho que son unos santos y hasta podemos hacer que canten para nosotros. Y el señor Markélov, ¿está de acuerdo?

Markélov se encogió de hombros, desarmado.

-¡No podéis dejarme sólo! Vayamos.

Los tres amigos se levantaron del banco.

-Qué barin tan amenazador tienes aquí -murmuró Paklin a Nezhdánov indicando a Markélov-. Un San Juan Bautista ni fu ni fa comiendo saltamontes... ¡sólo saltamontes, sin la miel! Pero aquel -dijo, haciendo un gesto con la cabeza en dirección a Solomin-, es espléndido. ¡Qué sonrisa tan deliciosa! Sonríen como él, de esa manera, sólo las personas que están muy por encima de los otros y que no lo saben.

¿Hay personas así?

-Son raras, pero las hay -respondió Paklin.

XIX

FÓMUSHKA y Fímushka -Fomá Lavréntievich y Evfímiia Pávlovna Subóchev- pertenecían a una de las más puras ramas de la nobleza rusa, a la vez que estaban considerados los más viejos habitantes de la ciudad de S. Se casaron muy jóvenes y se habían instalado hacía mucho tiempo en los límites de la ciudad, en su pequeña casa solariega de madera, la cual no abandonaron jamás así como tampoco habían cambiado en nada su forma de vida ni sus hábitos. Para ellos el tiempo parecía estancado, y nada "moderno" cruzaba las fronteras de su "oasis". Sus medios eran pocos, pero sus mujiks les proporcionaban, como en los tiempos de la servidumbre, algunas veces al año, animales y

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provisiones. El jefe del pueblo, en la fecha fijada, aparecía con las rentas y un par de gallos silvestres, que se suponía que habían sido muertos en los bosques de los señores.

En realidad, los bosques hacía mucho que habían desaparecido. Les ofrecían té a la puerta de la sala de visitas, les daban un gorro de piel de camero, un par de guantes de cuero verde, y les despedían con una bendición. Como en los tiempos antiguos, la casa estaba llena de criados. El viejo siervo Kaliópych, con una chaqueta larga de tejido basto, cuello alto y pequeños botones de acero, como en el pasado, anunciaba, con voz cantarina, que "el almuerzo está en la mesa", a la vez que se quedaba de pie, dormitando, detrás de la silla de la señora. La despensa le estaba confiada, y dirigía "los diferentes productos de víveres, el cardamomo y los vegetales en conserva" y, si alguien le preguntaba si no había oído decir que él, así como todos los siervos eran libres, respondía siempre que no se podía creer en todo lo que se decía, que los turcos estaban emancipados, pero que, gracias a Dios, eso no tenía nada que ver con él. Tenían a una chica enana, Pufka, para entretenerlos. La vieja ama Vasílievna acostumbraba a aparecer a la hora de la cena con un gran pañuelo oscuro en la cabeza y, con una voz honda, contaba todas las noticias: sobre Napoleón, la guerra de 1812, sobre el Anticristo y sobre los negros blancos, o bien se ponía la mano en el mentón, como si estuviera sufriendo mucho, para contar que había tenido un sueño y lo que éste le había revelado, o bien decía que había echado las cartas. La casa de los Subóchev era diferente de las demás casas de la ciudad: toda ella construida en roble, las ventanas tenían un aspecto rigurosamente cuadrado, los cristales dobles para el invierno nunca se retiraban, y había despensas y balcones con balaustradas y pequeñas estatuas en pilares de madera tallados, así como todo tipo de pasillos y gabinetes. Delante había una cerca y un jardín detrás, con barracones, graneros, cuadras, bodegas, estufas... un auténtico nido. Y no porque en todos esos almacenes hubiese muchas cosas guardadas; algunas cosas ya estaban en muy mal estado, pero estaban allí hacía tanto tiempo que tenían derecho a seguir allí. Los Subóchev tenían sólo dos caballos de silla, viejos, hirsutos, uno de los cuales de tan viejo que era, se había vuelto gris y se llamaba Inmóvil. Eran enganchados varias veces al mes a un carruaje extraordinario, que toda la ciudad conocía, ligeramente parecido a un globo terrestre con un cuarto cortado en la delantera, y forrado, en el interior, de un tejido amarillento extranjero, con un diseño de enormes puntos, que a todos les parecían verrugas. Lo más probable era que el último metro de ese tejido saliese de las fábricas de Utrecht o Lión en tiempos de la Emperatriz Isabel. El cochero de los Subóchev era también extraordinariamente viejo, olía siempre a aceite y alquitrán. Su barba empezaba inmediatamente debajo de los ojos, las cejas le caían como pequeñas cascadas hasta la barba. Era muy lento de movimientos, tardaba por lo menos cinco minutos para tomar un pellizco de rapé, dos minutos para apretar el chicote al cinto, y dos horas largas sólo para enganchar a Inmóvil. Se llamaba Perfishka. Si sucedía que los Subóchev montaban en su carruaje y éste se veía obligado a subir o bajar un poco de cuesta, quedaban aterrados, se agarraban a las correas y gritaban con fuerza al mismo tiempo: «¡Que los caballos... que los caballos... tengan la fuerza de Samuel, y que nosotros... seamos ligeros como una pluma, ligeros como una pluma!» Toda la ciudad les consideraba muy excéntricos, casi locos, y ellos mismos reconocían que no estaban muy de acuerdo con las costumbres modernas... pero eso no les preocupaba mucho, y continuaban siguiendo el tipo de vida con el que nacieron, fueron criados y se casaron. Sólo habían olvidado una costumbre de los viejos tiempos: nunca habían castigado a ningún siervo. Si sucedía que algún criado se emborrachaba o robaba, primero lo toleraban durante mucho tiempo -como se tolera el mal tiempo- y, finalmente, cuando ya no aguantaban más, se desembarazaban de él, pasándolo a otros amos. «¡Que otros te aguanten ahora un poco!», decían. Pero una desgracia de esas pasaba raramente, tan raramente que marcaba las épocas de la vida de la casa, y decían, por ejemplo: «Eso fue hace ya mucho tiempo. Fue cuando aquel granuja de Aldoshka estaba con nosotros», o bien «cuando robaron el gorro de piel con cola de zorra de papá». En casa de los Subóchev aún podía verse este tipo de sombreros. Otra característica importante de la vida de otros tiempos tampoco se notaba en ellos: ni Fímushka ni Fómushka eran exageradamente

Comentario [Librodot-96]: Se refiere a la emperatriz Isabel, hija de Pedro el Grande.

Comentario [Librodot-97]: Algunas traducciones de esta novela, sobre todo al inglés, dicen Sansón, lo que es más lógico, pero, de hecho, el original ruso se refiere a Samuel.

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religiosos. Fómushka incluso era seguidor de Voltaire, y Fímushka tenía un miedo terrible al clero y creía que los curas echaban aojadura. «Basta con que entre un cura en nuestra casa», decía ella, «y ¡ya está! ¡La leche se agria!» Iban raras veces a la iglesia y ayunaban a la manera católica, o sea, comían huevos, manteca y leche. Eso se sabía en toda la ciudad, lo que ciertamente no mejoraba su reputación. Pero su bondad conquistaba a todo el mundo, y aunque se riesen de sus excentricidades y les considerasen chalados y simplones, eran, asimismo, respetados por todos.

Sí, les respetaban... pero nadie les visitaba. Cosa que a ellos no les quitaba el sueño. Cuando estaban juntos nunca se aburrían, y por eso nunca se separaban ni deseaban otra compañía. Ni Fómushka ni Fímushka habían estado nunca enfermos, y, si uno sentía una leve indisposición, *ambos* tomaban una infusión de flores de tila, se daban una fricción de aceite caliente en los riñones o bien se ponían gotas de grasa caliente en las plantas de los pies, y se curaban inmediatamente. Pasaban los días siempre de la misma manera. Se levantaban tarde, tomaban chocolate en pequeñas jícaras que parecían almireces. «El té», aseguraban ellos, «se puso de moda después de nuestro tiempo.» Se sentaban uno frente al otro, y conversaban (¡y encontraban siempre algún tema!) o leían fragmentos de las *Recreaciones,* del *Espejo del Mundo o* del *Aónides, o* bien hojeaban un viejo álbum forrado de marroquinería roja con márgenes dorados, que en tiempos había pertenecido, como la inscripción revelaba, a una tal *Mme. Barbe de Kabyline.* Cuándo y cómo aquel álbum había ido a parar a sus manos era algo que ni ellos mismos sabían. Contenía algunos poemas franceses y muchos poemas rusos antiguos, en prosa, entre los cuales había, por ejemplo, la siguiente meditación sobre Cicerón:

Comentario [Librodot-98]: *Priiátnye preprovozhdénie vrémini* (Recreaciones agradables del tiempo), *Zérkalo sveta* (Espejo del Mundo) *y Aonid* (Aónidas): revistas rusas que se publicaban en la segunda mitad del siglo XVIII. Ilustran el carácter arcaico de los intereses de Fómushka y Fímushka.

«La disposición con la que Cicerón tomó posesión del cargo de cuestor puede deducirse de lo siguiente. Pidiendo a los dioses que dieran testimonio de la pureza de sus sentimientos en todos los cargos con los que había sido hasta entonces honrado, se consideró ligado con los más sagrados lazos al cumplimiento de éste y se negó no sólo a los placeres prohibidos por la ley, sino que se privó incluso de los divertimientos ligeros que parecen indispensables a todos.» Abajo venía: «Escrito en Siberia, con hambre y fríio.» Era también interesante el poema titulado «Tirsis», donde se encontraban estas estrofas:

Calmo el universo rige,
La llovizna brilla agradable,
La naturaleza tierna, fresca,
Le da de nuevo su vida.

Sólo Tirsis con su alma afligida
Sufre de tormento y de tristeza...
Cuando con él no está Aneta querida
Nada hay que le pueda alegrar.

Y el impromptu de un capitán que estuvo allá en 1790, con fecha de 6 de mayo:

¡Nunca te olvidaré,
Querida aldea!
Siempre recordaré
Los bellos tiempos que allí pasé.
Tiempo que yo he honrado
Con tu amo.
Los cinco mejores días de mi vida
Pasados entre la más digna gente,
Entre damas y muchas jóvenes,
Y otras personas *ante*resantes.

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En la última página del álbum había, en lugar de versos, recetas para remediar los males de estómago, para los espasmos e incluso contra las lombrices. Los Subóchev almorzaban exactamente a las doce, y sólo comían platos antiguos: buñuelos de queso, col con vinagre, tapas, sopa fría, jaleas, guisos, gallina desmenuzada con azafrán, buñuelos con miel. Después del almuerzo descansaban una hora, no más, y al despertarse, de nuevo se sentaban uno frente al otro y bebían licor de arándanos y a veces un vino espumoso llamado "cuarenta cabezas", que, fuera como fuera, casi siempre saltaba todo de la botella, lo que divertía mucho a los señores, para gran disgusto de Kaliópych, que tenía que limpiarlo todo. No paraba de refunfuñar contra la gobernanta y contra el cocinero como si ellos fueran los inventores de aquel vino... «¿Y qué placer les da? ¡Sólo estropea los muebles!» Después, la pareja Subóchev leía de nuevo un poco o se entretenía con la enana Pufka, o cantaba duetos antiguos (sus voces eran exactamente iguales, altas, débiles, un poco vibrantes y roncas -sobre todo después de la siesta- pero bastante agradables). Solían jugar a las cartas, pero sólo sabían juegos antiguos. En seguida aparecía el samovar; por la noche tomaban té... Hacían esa concesión al espíritu de los tiempos, aunque considerasen siempre que era una condescendencia y que la nación se estaba claramente debilitando debido a "esa hierba china". Por lo general, evitaban criticar los nuevos tiempos y elogiar el pasado: vivían como en el pasado, pero consideraban que las demás personas podían vivir de otra manera, e incluso mejor, siempre que no fueran forzadas a ello. A las ocho en punto, Kaliópych servía una cena fría, y a las nueve, el alto lecho de plumas, a rayas, recibía los pequeños cuerpos rotundos de Fómushka y Fímushka en su abrazo suave, y un sueño tranquilo no tardaba en bajar sobre sus párpados. Y todo callaba en la pequeña casa anticuada: el pequeño candil brujuleaba junto al icono, el olor de almizcle disminuía de intensidad, se oía el chirriar de un grillo, y aquella pareja inocente, ridícula y bondadosa, se dormía.

A casa de esos dos originales o, para utilizar la expresión que Paklin empleaba, "periquitos", que cuidaban de su hermana, conducía éste a sus amigos.

La hermana de Paklin era una muchacha lista, con un rostro bastante atractivo. Tenía unos ojos maravillosos, pero desgraciadamente era jorobada y eso la había destrozado completamente: le robó toda la confianza y alegría, la hizo desconfiada y casi mala. Tampoco el nombre la ayudaba: ¡Snandulia! Paklin quiso cambiárselo por el de Sofía, pero ella lo rechazó firmemente, alegando que una jorobada debía llamarse Snandulia. Era una buena pianista. «Gracias a mis dedos largos», observaba, no sin amargura. «Todos los jorobados tienen los dedos largos.»

Los visitantes fueron a encontrar a Fómushka y Fímushka en el momento exacto que se despertaban de su siesta y bebían licor de arándanos.

-¡En seguida entraremos en el siglo XVIII! -exclamó Paklin en cuanto pasaron el umbral de la casa de los Subóchev.

Y realmente, el siglo XVIII vino a su encuentro ya en la entrada, con sus pequeños biombos azules, decorados con siluetas negras de damas empolvadas y caballeros recortados en papel. Las siluetas, introducidas por Lavater, estaban muy de moda en Rusia durante los años ochenta del siglo pasado. La súbita aparición de tantas visitas -¡cuatro de una vez!- causó sensación en aquella casa tan poco visitada. Se oyó el ruido de pasos apresurados, calzados y descalzos, algunas cabezas de mujeres aparecieron y desaparecieron, una u otra fue empujada, otra gimió, otra rió, otra murmuró, excitada:

Comentario [Librodot-99]: O sea, del siglo XVIII.

-¿Qué sucede?

Finalmente apareció Kaliópych, enfundado en su vieja chaqueta y, abriendo la puerta del "salón", anunció en voz alta:

-¡Aquí está Sila Samsonich con algunos caballeros más!

Los señores de la casa no se agitaron tanto como los criados. No obstante, la intrusión de cuatro hombres adultos en su sala de visitas, a pesar de que ésta era bastante grande, sin duda les sorprendió un poco. Pero Paklin se apresuró a tranquilizarles, presentó a Nezhdánov, Solomin y Markélov como personas honradas y que no tenían nada que ver con "la corte".

A Fómushka y Fímushka no les gustaba la gente de la corte, o sea, los funcionarios.

Snandulia, que apareció a petición de su hermano, quedó mucho más perturbada y

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agitada que los viejos Subóchev. Éstos pidieron -ambos al mismo tiempo y precisamente con las mismas palabras- que se sentaran y preguntaron a los visitantes qué querían tomar: ¿té, chocolate o una bebida efervescente con jalea? Cuando éstos contestaron que no iban a tomar nada, puesto que habían acabado de desayunar con el comerciante Golushkin y pronto volverían para almorzar con él, los viejos dejaron de insistir y, doblando de la misma manera las manos sobre sus vientres, empezaron a conversar.

Al principio, la conversación fue un poco muerta, pero no tardó en animarse. Paklin les divirtió extraordinariamente, contando la conocida anécdota de Gogol sobre el gobernador de una ciudad, que consiguió entrar en una iglesia absolutamente atestada de gente, y sobre un pastelón que era precisamente ese mismo gobernador; y ellos rieron hasta las lágrimas. Reían, ambostambién, de la misma manera: con grandes gañidos que terminaban en tos, a la vez que enrojecían debido al esfuerzo. Paklin observó que, de una manera general, en las personas del tipo de los Subóchev las citas de Gogol funcionan con mucha fuerza, pero su intención no era divertirles, sino exhibirles a los amigos, y por eso cambió de táctica y dispuso las cosas de tal manera que muy pronto tuvo a los dos viejecitos muy bien dispuestos. Fómushka extendió la mano y mostró a las visitas una caja de madera para rapé, muy antigua, en la cual en otro tiempo se podían distinguir trenta y seis pequeñas figuras humanas en varias posiciones. Todas ellas habían desaparecido hacía mucho, pero Fómushka aún las veía y podía contarlas y mostrarlas.

-Vean -decía él-, este está mirando por la ventana, vean... saca la cabeza hacia fuera...

Y aquel lugar donde su dedo gordiflón señalaba, con la uña levantada, estaba tan liso como todo el resto de la tapa de la caja. Después llamó la atención de las visitas hacia un cuadro al óleo colgado justo sobre su cabeza, que representaba a un cazador de perfil, montando un caballo bayo que -pintado también de perfil- galopaba sobre una planicie de nieve. El cazador llevaba un sombrero alto de piel de carnero blanco con un punto azulado, una túnica de piel de camello orlada con terciopelo, y un chaleco bordado en oro; un guante bordado de seda estaba graciosamente metido en el chaleco, y un puñal grabado en negro y plata le colgaba a uno de los lados. En una de las manos, el cazador, que parecía joven y nutrido, llevaba un enorme cuerno, ornado con borlas rojas, y en la otra las riendas y el látigo. Las cuatro piernas del caballo se veían suspendidas en el aire y en cada una de ellas el pintor había representado cuidadosamente la herradura en la que se distinguían incluso los clavos.

-Y observen -dijo Fómushka señalando con su pequeño dedo gordito cuatro puntos semicirculares que se veían en el fondo blanco por entre las piernas del caballo-, huellas en la nieve... ¡hasta tiene las huellas!

Sobre la razón por la que las huellas eran sólo cuatro y no se veían más hacia atrás... Fómushka no dijo nada.

-¡Soy yo! -dijo, después de una pausa, con una sonrisa modesta.

-¿Cómo? -exclamó Nezhdánov-. ¿Fue cazador?

-Sí... pero durante poco tiempo. Una vez, en pleno galope, el caballo me lanzó de cabeza y me hice daño en el *kurpei.* Fímushka cogió miedo... bien, y me lo prohibió. Desde entonces he desistido.

¿Se hizo daño dónde? -preguntó Nezhdánov.

-En el *kutpei* -repitió Fómushka, bajando la voz.

Los visitantes se entremiraron en silencio. Nadie sabía qué era un *kurpei, o* sea, Markélov sabía que *kurpei* era el nombre que se daba a una borla en el sombrero cosaco o circasiano, pero Fómushka no podía haberse hecho daño *allí.* De todos modos nadie se decidió a preguntarle qué era exactamente un *kurpei.*

-Bien, ahora que tú te exhibiste -dijo de repente Fómushka-, llega mi turno.

De un pequeño *bonheur du jour,* -como llamaban antiguamente a los escritorios de pequeñas puertas curvas con una tapa redonda que se metía atrás-, sacó una miniatura pintada a la acuarela, dentro de un marco oval de bronce, que representaba a una niña de unos cuatro años completamente desnuda con una aljaba en los hombros atada con cintas azules al pecho, comprobando las puntas de las flechas con la yema del meñique. La niña tenía el pelo muy rizado, sonreía y era algo bizca. Fímushka la mostró a los visitantes.

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-Y esta era yo -dijo.

-¿Sí?

-Sí, sí. Cuando era niña. En el tiempo de mi fallecido papá nos visitaba un pintor francés, un excelente pintor. Me pintó así para el día del santo de papá. ¡Era un francés tan simpático! Llegaba, hacía una reverencia muy bella y nos besaba la mano, y cuando se marchaba se besaba la punta de sus propios dedos, ¡eh! ¡eh! Y hacía reverencias a tontas y a locas. ¡Era un francés muy simpático!

Los visitantes alabaron el trabajo; Paklin dijo que incluso había una cierta semblanza.

Aquí Fómushka empezó a hablar de los franceses modernos y dijo que ahora seguramente eran todos unos granujas.

-¿Por qué, Fomá Lavréntievich?

-Por ejemplo, ¡los nombres que tienen hoy! -¿Por ejemplo?

-Por ejemplo: ¡Nogent-Saint-Lorraine! ¡Un nombre de salteador!

A propósito de esto Fómushka preguntó quién reinaba en la actualidad en París. Le dijeron que era Napoleón. Pareció que quedaba asombrado y pesaroso.

-¡Extraño!... Tan viejo... -empezó; y paró, mirando alrededor, confuso.

Fómushka sabía mal el francés y leía a Voltaire traducido (en la cabecera, en una caja escondida, conservaba un manuscrito de *Candide),* pero a veces salía con expresiones como: «Esto, querido amigo, es *fausse parquet!* -(En el sentido de "es sospechoso", "es falso")-, lo que hacía reír mucho a la gente, hasta que un intelectual francés explicó que se trataba de una vieja expresión parlamentaria usada en su país antes de 1789.

En cuanto la conversación cambió hacia Francia y los franceses, Fímushka decidió hacer una pregunta que tenía en la cabeza. Primero pensó dirigirse a Markélov, pero le pareció muy preocupado; después se volvió hacia Solomin... pero ¡no! Le pareció demasiado simplón, quizá no supiera francés. Decidió dirigirse a Nezhdánov:

-Me gustaría hacerle una pregunta -empezó ella-, si me permite. Mi pariente Sila Samsonich lo sabe pero se burla de mí y de mi ignorancia femenina.

-¿De qué se trata?

-Vamos a ver: ¿Si queremos preguntar en francés: "Qué es esto?", tenemos que decir: "Kése-kesé-kese-lá"?

-Correcto.

¿Pero se puede decir también: "Kése-kese-lá"?

-Sí.

-¿Y sólo: "Kese-lá"?

-También.

¿Todo quiere decir lo mismo?

-Sí.

Fímushka quedó pensativa durante un momento y después movió los brazos.

-Bien, Sílushka -dijo ella, por fin-, yo estaba equivocada y tú en lo cierto. Pero ¡estos franceses!... ¡Qué listos son!...

Paklin rogó a los viejecitos que cantaran una balada. Se sorprendieron con la idea, pero aceptaron en seguida, con la condición de que Snandulia les acompañara en el clavicordio... ella ya sabía qué. En un rincón de la sala había un pequeño instrumento del que ninguno de los visitantes se había dado cuenta. Snandulia se sentó ante ese "clavicordio", dio algunos acordes... Nezhdánov nunca antes había oído sonidos tan amargos, desafinados, rechinantes y badajeantes, pero los viejecitos se apresuraron a cantar:

Sería para llorar,...

empezó Fómushka,

El amor nos encontró,
Un corazón Dios nos dio,

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Para qué si no para amar?

Pero hay sufrimiento en el amor,

respondió Fímushka.

Sin sufrimiento o maldad
En el mundo, ¿dónde hay pasión?
¿Dónde hay? ¿Dónde hay? ¿Dónde hay?,

repetía Fímushka.

Con el amor, infortunios crueles
En todas partes, en todas partes,

cantaron ambos.

¡En todas partes, en todas partes!,

cantó Fímushka, sola.

-¡Bravo! -exclamó Paklin-. Eso fue la primera estrofa. ¿Y la segunda?

-Con todo el placer -respondió Fómushka-, pero, Snandulia Samsónovna, ¿dónde está ese trino? Después de mi verso es necesario un trino.

-Muy bien -respondió Snandulia-, tendrá su trino. Fómushka empezó de nuevo:

¿Alguien amó plenamente
Sin que el tormento le ponga a prueba?
¿Dónde está el amante
Que no lloró ni suspiró?

Y luego Fímushka:

Así el corazón en la amargura
Como los barcos perecen en el mar...
¿Cuál fue su fin?
¡La perdición, la perdición!,

repitió Fómushka, y esperó que Snandulia tocara el trino.

¡La perdición, la perdición, la perdición!,

repitió Fímushka.

Y después otra vez juntos:
Llévame, Señor, el corazón,
¡Lejos, lejos, lejos!
¡Lejos, lejos, lejos!

Y todos, de nuevo, esperaron el trino.

Librodot

-¡Bravo! ¡Bravo! -exclamó el grupo, a excepción de Markélov, aplaudiendo.

«¿No sentirán ellos», pensó Nezhdánov en seguida que se calmaron los aplausos, «que están haciendo el papel... de bufones? Quizá no, o quizá lo sepan pero piensen que no hay ningún mal en eso si así divierten a los demás. Y si miramos las cosas a través de ese ángulo... están en lo cierto, cien veces en lo cierto.»

Bajo la influencia de esta idea, empezó de golpe a decirles amabilidades, a las que en respuesta ellos sólo hacían pequeñas reverencias, sin levantarse de sus lugares... Pero en ese momento, desde la habitación de al lado, quizá un cuarto de dormir, o de criadas, donde hacía mucho se oían ruidos y susurros, hizo su aparición la enana Pufka, acompañada de la ama Vasílievna. Pufka empezó a gritar y a hacer muecas, y la ama primero la calmó, pero después la estimuló aún más.

Markélov, que desde hacía tiempo daba señales de impaciencia (Solomin tenía una sonrisa más ancha que de costumbre), de repente se dirigió a Fómushka:

-No esperaba de usted -empezó, con su aire severo-, con su mente clara... incluso es seguidor de Voltaire, ¿verdad?... que fuera capaz de divertirse con algo que debería ser motivo de compasión: la deformidad... -Se acordó en el acto de la hermana de Paklin y se mordió la lengua.

Fómushka se ruborizó:

-Sí... pero, ya lo ve, no soy yo... ella misma... Pero Pufka se lanzó sobre Markélov:

-Y ¿por qué te metes tú -gritó ella con su voz confusa- a insultar a nuestros señores? ¿Te molesta mucho que ellos me hayan recogido, criado, alimentado? ¿No puedes ver la buena suerte de los demás? Y ¿quién te pidió que vinieras aquí, tú que eres un granuja negro con un bigote como un escarabajo...? -Aquí Pufka indicó con sus dedos gordos y cortos cómo era su bigote.

Vasílievna reía con toda su boca sin dientes, mientras de la habitación de al lado volvía el eco de esas carcajadas.

-Claro que no le estoy juzgando -dijo Markélov a Fómushka-. Es de caridad recoger a los pobres y a los defectuosos. Pero permítame que le haga una observación: vivir lujosamente y no molestar a nadie, pero no mover un dedo para ayudar al prójimo... no significa que se sea bueno. Yo, sinceramente, ¡no tengo gran aprecio por ese tipo de bondad!

Aquí Pufka hizo un aullido ensordecedor. No había comprendido nada de lo que había dicho Markélov, pero el "negro" estaba censurando... ¿cómo se atrevía él? Vasílievna también murmuró algo y Fómushka se puso las manos delante del pecho y se volvió hacia la mujer:

-Fímushka, querida -dijo él, casi con lágrimas en los ojos-, ¿oyes lo que dice este caballero? Que somos unos pecadores, unos granujas, unos fariseos... que vivimos del trabajo de los otros, ¡oh! ¡oh! ¡oh!... Tendríamos que salir de nuestra casa e ir a la calle... con la escoba en la mano, ¡a ganarnos la vida! ¡Oh, oh, oh!

Al oír aquellas palabras, Pufka aulló aún más que antes, Fímushka entornó los ojos, torció los labios, y ya tenía el pecho lleno de aire, lista para desagraviar, para hablar...

Sabe Dios cómo hubiera terminado aquello, si Paklin no hubiese intervenido.

-Pero, bueno, ¿qué es eso? ¡Por favor! -exclamó éste, gesticulando y riendo alto-. ¿No les da vergüenza? El señor Markélov estaba bromeando, pero puso una cara tan seria que no lo parecía... y ¿ustedes le tomaron en serio? Pero ¡ya terminó! Evfímiia Pávlova, mi querida, nosotros nos marchamos en seguida, pero antes ¿no nos quiere leer el destino en las cartas?... ¡Sabe hacerlo tan bien! Hermana, ¡trae las cartas!

Fímushka miró al marido, que estaba tranquilamente sentado, y quedó sosegada.

-Las cartas, las cartas... -dijo ella-. Ya me olvidé... hace mucho tiempo que no las tengo entre las manos...

Pero ella misma arrancó a Snandulia una baraja de cartas extrañas, muy viejas.

-Primero ¿de quién?

-De todos -exclamó Paklin, pensando-: «¡Qué viejecita tan encantadora! Va a donde la llevan... Es fácil de conducir.» Y ya en voz alta-: Diga nuestro destino, nuestro carácter... ¡todo!

Librodot

Fímushka empezó a barajar las cartas, pero de golpe lanzó la baraja sobre la mesa.

-¡Yo no necesito las cartas! -exclamó-. Conozco bien el carácter de cada uno. Y el destino está de acuerdo con el carácter. Éste de aquí -señaló a Solomin- es un hombre frío, constante; aquel -señaló con un dedo hacia Markélov- es un hombre impetuoso, destructivo - Pufka le sacó la lengua-; tú -miró a Paklin-, no vale la pena decirte nada pues te conoces muy bien: ¡no pasas de una cabeza vacía! Y aquel...

Señaló a Nezhdánov... y vaciló.

-¡Qué? -preguntó él-. Diga, por favor: ¿qué tipo de hombre soy yo?

-¿Qué tipo de hombre eres...? -repitió Fímushka arrastradamente-. Eres un hombre digno de piedad... ¡eso es lo que tú eres!

Nezhdánov se estremeció.

-¿Digno de piedad? ¿Y por qué?

-Eso mismo. Me inspiras piedad... ¡y es todo!

-Pero, ¿por qué?

¿Por qué? Los ojos me lo dicen. ¿Crees que soy estúpida? Soy más lista que tú... aunque seas pelirrojo. Me das lástima... y ¡es todo lo que te puedo decir!

Todos quedaron callados... se miraron los unos a otros, y continuaron callados.

-Bien, adiós, amigos míos -exclamó Paklin-. Nos hemos entretenido demasiado y seguro que se han aburrido. Estos señores tienen que marcharse... y yo les acompaño. Adiós, y gracias por su amabilidad.

-Adiós, Adiós, vengan otra vez, no hagan cumplidos -dijeron a la vez Fómushka y Fímushka. Y de golpe, Fómushka dijo lentamente:

-Muchos, muchos, muchos años de vida, muchos...

-Muchos, muchos -repitió Kaliópich de una manera inesperada, abriendo la puerta.

Y los cuatro se encontraron de golpe en la calle, delante de la casa achaparrada; y por las ventanas se oía la voz aguda de Pufka, que gritaba:

-Locos... ¡Locos!

Paklin rió con fuerza, pero nadie más le acompañó. Markélov miró uno a uno a sus camaradas, como si esperara oír una palabra de indignación...

Sólo Solomin conservaba su sonrisa habitual.

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BIEN -empezó Paklin-. Estuvimos en el siglo dieciocho y ahora ¡vamos directamente al siglo XX! Golushkin es un hombre tan avanzado que no es propio considerarlo del siglo diecinueve.

-¿Le conoces? -preguntó Nezhdánov.

-¡Qué pregunta! Yo dije "vamos" porque tengo la intención de ir con vosotros.

-¿Cómo? ¿Sin conocerle?

-Exactamente. ¿Y vosotros conocíais a mis periquitos? -Tú nos los presentaste.

-Entonces, presentadme también. Supongo que no tendréis secretos para mí... y Golushkin es un hombre hospitalario. Veréis qué contento se pondrá al ver una cara nueva. Aquí en S., las personas son muy simples.

-Sí -murmuró Markélov-, aquí las personas no hacen cumplidos.

Paklin movió la cabeza.

-Supongo que se refiere a mí... Pero, ¡qué hacer! Quizá merezca esta indirecta. Pero, amigo mío, debería usted liberarse de esos pensamientos taciturnos, causados por su temperamento bilioso. Y sobre todo...

-Y usted, amigo mío -interrumpió, furioso, Markélov-, permítame que le diga... como un aviso, que nunca en mi vida tuve predisposición hacia las bromas... y mucho menos hoy. Y ¿cómo es que conoce mi temperamento? -Puso un énfasis especial en la penúltima sílaba-:

Nos conocemos desde hace muy poco.

-Está bien, está bien, no se enfade y no blasfeme... le creo -exclamó Paklin. Y, dirigiéndose a Solomin-: Oh, usted -exclamó-, usted, a quien la sagaz Fímushka llamó hombre frío y ciertamente tranquilo... dígame, ¿cree que yo quise ser desagradable con alguien o bromear inoportunamente? Yo sólo sugerí ir con ustedes a casa de Golushkin. Por otro lado, soy una persona inofensiva. No tengo la culpa de que el señor Markélov tenga un carácter bilioso.

Solomin encogió primero un hombro, después el otro. Era su costumbre, cuando no sabía qué responder inmediatamente.

-Sin duda -dijo finalmente-, el señor Paklin no podía ofender a nadie... ni lo deseaba. ¿Y por qué no habría de acompañarnos a casa del señor Golushkin? Supongo que pasaremos allá el tiempo de una manera tan agradable como en casa de sus parientes, y con tanto beneficio.

Paklin le amenazó con el dedo.

-¡Ah, veo que también es malo! Sin embargo, también va a casa de Golushkin, ¿verdad?

-Claro que sí. El día es mío y sin eso seria despilfarrarlo.

-Entonces, ya está, *en avant,* marchons! ¡Hacia el siglo XX! ¡Hacia el siglo XX! Nezhdánov, tú, ¡que eres un hombre progresista, enséñanos el camino!

Comentario [Librodot-100]: ¡Adelante, marchemos!

-Muy bien, vamos, pero no repitas siempre las mismas bromas, de lo contrario pensaremos que no tienes más.

-Para vosotros aún tengo en exceso -dijo Paklin alegremente. Y avanzó, como él decía, no caminando sino "cojeando".

-¡Qué hombre tan divertido! -observó Solomin, caminando de bracete con Nezhdánov-. Si alguna vez nos mandaran a Siberia, Dios nos proteja, habría alguien para divertirnos.

Markélov seguía callado detrás de todos.

Entretanto, en casa del comerciante Golushkin, se tomaban todas las medidas para hacer un almuerzo "opíparo"... "elegante". Para empezar, había una sopa de pescado, con mucha grasa... y repugnante; se prepararon varios "patés y fricasés" (Golushkin, como hombre de la más alta cultura europea, aunque fuera Viejo Creyente, tenía un cocinero francés, que había sido echado de un club por falta de aseo), pero sobre todo se habían puesto en hielo varias botellas de champán.

El señor de la casa recibió al grupo con su característica timidez, ruido y media risa. Como Paklin había previsto, se puso muy contento de verle, y preguntó: «¿Es de los nuestros?» Y, sin esperar la respuesta, exclamó: «¡Claro que sí! ¡Qué idea!» Después contó que acababa de llegar de casa del "chalado" del gobernador, que le había importunado sobre una institución cualquiera... ¡quién sabe de qué se trata!, de caridad... Y, decididamente, no se sabía qué daba más satisfacción a Golushkin, si haber sido recibido por el gobernador o estar insultándolo en presencia de aquella juventud progresista. Después les presentó al prometido prosélito. ¿Y quién era ese prosélito? Nada menos que el mismo individuo insinuante, de aire tuberculoso y cuello largo, que habían visto por la mañana, a quien Golushkin había llamado Vasia, su dependiente.

-No es muy elocuente -aseguró Golushkin señalándole con los cinco dedos-, pero es afecto a nuestra causa de todo corazón.

Pero Vasia sólo hizo una reverencia, después se ruborizó, pestañeó y mostró los dientes de tal manera que era imposible saber si era un idiota o si, por el contrario, era un granuja sin escrúpulos y un traidor.

-Bien, señores, a la mesa, a la mesa -exclamó Golushkin. Se sentaron a la mesa, después de despertar el apetito con pescado salado. Seguidamente, Golushkin mandó que trajeran el champán, que salió con pequeños trozos helados cuando lo pusieron en las tazas-. ¡A la nuestra... a nuestra empresa! -exclamó Golushkin, guiñando el ojo y señalando al criado con la cabeza, como diciendo que en presencia de extraños era necesario tener cuidado.

El prosélito Vasia seguía callado, sentado al borde de la silla y de una manera general se comportaba con un servilismo totalmente en desacuerdo con las convicciones a las que, por boca del amo, era afecto de todo corazón. Sin embargo engullía el vino como un desesperado.

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Todos hablaban, o sea, hablaba el propio amo de la casa, y Paklin; Paklin especialmente. Nezhdánov estaba aburrido, Markélov indignado, aunque no tanto como en la casa de los Subóchev. Solomin observaba.

Paklin se divertía. Sus frases rápidas agradaban a Golushkin, que no desconfiaba que aquel "tullido" de vez en cuando murmurara al oído de Nezhdánov, que estaba sentado a su lado, las observaciones más maliciosas sobre él. Pensaba que se trataba de un papahuevos y que le podía "despreciar" con condescendencia... y por eso le gustaba. Si Paklin estuviese sentado a su lado, seguro que ya le habría hecho cosquillas con el dedo en las costillas o le habría dado palmadas en el hombro. Así, sólo le hacía muecas desde el otro lado de la mesa y guiñaba el ojo en su dirección... pero entre Paklin y él se sentaba, primero Markélov -esa "nube negra"- y después Solomin. Golushkin se partía de risa a cada palabra de Paklin. Reía a placer, anticipadamente, cogiéndose el vientre, mostrando sus encías azuladas. Paklin no tardó en comprender lo que se esperaba de él, y empezó a insultarlo todo (lo que para él era fácil), todo y a todos: a los conservadores, a los liberales, a los funcionarios, a los abogados, a los administradores, a los propietarios, a los Consejos rurales y comarcales, a Moscú, a San Petersburgo.

-Sí, sí, sí -decía Golushkin-, ¡eso mismo, eso mismo, eso mismo! Vea, por ejemplo, nuestro alcalde... ¡un auténtico asno! ¡Un cretino insuperable! Yo le digo que si esto, que si aquello... y él no entiende nada... como nuestro gobernador.

-¿Su gobernador es estúpido? -preguntó Paklin.

-Como le he dicho, ¡es un asno!

-¿Ya se ha dado cuenta de si habla con voz ronca o nasal?

-¿Cómo? -preguntó Golushkin, ligeramente sorprendido.

-¿No lo sabe? En Rusia, todos los civiles importantes tienen la voz ronca y los militares hablan por la nariz. Sólo los dignatarios más elevados hablan con voz ronca y nasal al mismo tiempo.

Golushkin rió con un bramido, hasta las lágrimas.

-Sí, sí -sollozó-, si habla por la nariz... por la nariz... ¡es militar!

«¡Qué idiota!», pensó Paklin.

-¡En este país todo está podrido, nos giremos hacia donde sea! -gritó Golushkin-. ¡Todo, todo está podrido!

-Mi querido Kapitón Andreích -observó Paklin, con pose. (Había acabado de preguntar a Nezhdánov: ¿Por qué motivo el gilipollas mueve tanto los brazos, como si llevara la chaqueta muy apretada?»)- Mi querido Kapitón Andreích, créame, las cosas a medias no sirven para nada.

-¿Qué cosas a medias? -gritó Golushkin furiosamente, dejando de reír y tomando un aire feroz-. ¡Tiene que ser radicalmente! Vaska, bebe...

-Sí... sí, Kapitón Andreích, ¡be...bo! -respondió el chupatintas vaciando el vaso en la garganta.

Golushkin también "vació".

-¡No sé como no revienta! -murmuró Paklin a Nezhdánov.

-Está acostumbrado -respondió éste.

Pero el chupatintas no era el único que bebía. El ambiente fue, poco a poco, afectando a todos. Nezhdánov, Markélov, hasta Solomin empezaron a tomar parte en la conversación.

Primero desdeñosamente, como si estuviera aburrido consigo mismo por no mantener su carácter y dejarse arrastrar, Nezhdánov empezó a hablar, diciendo que había llegado el momento de que se dejase ya de palabras, y empezase la "acción", que estaban ya bien firmes. Y entonces, sin darse cuenta de que estaba contradiciéndose, empezó a exigir que le mostraran los elementos reales y auténticos que tenían para apoyarse, porque no los veía.

-La sociedad no está con nosotros, el pueblo no tiene conciencia... ¡este es el problema!

Nadie hizo objeciones, no porque no hubiese nada que objetar sino porque todos ya habían empezado a hablar. Markélov empezó a martillear con una voz sorda y enfadada, persistente («Como si estuviera partiendo leña, observó Paklin). Nadie sabía exactamente de

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qué hablaba, pero la palabra "artillería" se le oyó decir durante un breve silencio... seguro que se refería a los defectos que había descubierto en su organización. Entraron también en escena alemanes y ayudantes de campo. Solomin observó que había dos maneras de esperar: esperar y no hacer nada, y esperar e ir empujando la causa hacia adelante.

-No necesitamos moderados -dijo bruscamente Markélov.

-Los moderados hasta ahora se han ido hacia las clases superiores -observó Solomin-, y nosotros lo intentamos desde abajo.

-¡No queremos eso, diablos! ¡No queremos eso! -gritó Golushkin, furioso-. Tiene que ser de una vez, ¡de una vez!

-O sea, ¿quiere echarse por la ventana?

-¿Y por qué no? -gritó Golushkin-. ¡Y saltaré! ¡Y Vaska también! Basta con que yo se lo diga y él se echa! Ah, ¿Vaska? ¿Verdad que te echarías?

El chupatintas acabó de beber el vaso de champán. -A donde usted vaya, Kapitón Andreích, yo iré también. ¿Tendría yo coraje para discutir?

-¡Bien, bien! ¡Vale más que no discutas, si no quieres que te sacuda el esqueleto!

No tardó en crearse una auténtica babilonia. Se levantó un griterío acompañado del rumor parecido cuando cae una "tempestad de nieve". Al igual que los primeros copos de nieve, que giran rápidamente en el aire triste de otoño, en la atmósfera sofocante del comedor de Golushkin, las palabras volaban en todas direcciones, rodando unas sobre otras: progreso, gobierno, literatura, la cuestión de los impuestos, la cuestión de la iglesia, la cuestión femenina, los tribunales, el clasicismo, el realismo, el nihilismo, el comunismo, la cuestión internacional, clerical, liberal, capital, la administración, la organización, la asociación ¡y hasta la cristalización! Parece que Golushkin deseaba precisamente una confusión así; le parecía, y era, para él, la cosa auténtica... Estaba exultante.

-¡Mírennos bien! ¡Abran camino!... ¡Aquí está Kapitón Golushkin!

El oficinista Vasia estaba ya tan borracho que empezó a reír y a hablar con el plato, y de golpe, como un loco, gritó:

-Qué diablos es esto... ¿un proinstituto?

Golushkin se levantó en aquel momento y, echando hacia atrás su rostro colorado, en el que una expresión de profunda satisfacción y triunfo estaba extrañamente mezclada con otro sentimiento, un terror secreto y hasta desconfianza, gritó:

-¡Sacrifico *mil* más! Vaska, ¡dámelos!

A lo que Vaska respondió a media voz:

-¡En seguida!

Pero Paklin, pálido y sudoroso (durante el último cuarto de hora había bebido más aún que el oficinista), saltó de su lugar y, levantando las manos por encima de la cabeza, dijo vigorosamente:

-¡Sacrifico! Él dijo: ¡sacrifico! ¡Oh! ¡Profanación de la palabra sagrada! ¡Sacrifico! Nadie se atreve a alzarse hasta ti, nadie tiene fuerzas para cumplir las obligaciones que tú impones, ciertamente ninguno de los aquí presentes... y este cretino, este miserable saco de dinero, abre la panza, deja caer unos miserables rublos y grita: ¡sacrifico! Y quiere gratitud, espera una corona de laureles, ¡el granuja!

Golushkin no oyó o no comprendió lo que dijo Paklin, o quizá pensó que era una broma, porque gritó de nuevo:

-Sí, *¡mil* rublos! ¡La palabra de Kapitón Golushkin es sagrada! -de repente se metió la mano en el bolsillo del costado-: ¡Aquí está el dinerillo! Cojan, cojan, y ¡recuerden siempre al Kapitón!

Cuando se excitaba, hablaba de sí como los niños, en tercera persona. Nezhdánov recogió los billetes que Golushkin había lanzado sobre la mesa manchada de vino. Y después, como ya no quedaba nada más que discutir, se levantaron, cogieron los sombreros y salieron de la casa.

Al aire libre, todos sintieron cómo la cabeza les daba vueltas... especialmente Paklin.

-Bien, ¿adónde vamos ahora? -dijo él no sin dificultad.

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-Yo no sé adonde iréis vosotros -respondió Solomin-, pero sí sé que yo me voy a casa.

-¿A la fábrica?

-Sí.

-¿Ahora, de noche, a pie?

¿Y por qué no? Por aquí no hay lobos, ni salteadores y mis piernas son buenas. Y de noche hace fresco.

-¡Pero son cuatro verstas!

-Aunque fueran cinco. ¡Adiós, señores!

Solomin se abotonó la chaqueta, se empujó el gorro hacia adelante, encendió un cigarrillo y siguió por la carretera con largos pasos.

-Y tú, ¿adónde vas? -preguntó Paklin a Nezhdánov.

-Voy a su casa -respondió señalando a Markélov, que estaba inmóvil, con las manos cruzadas sobre el pecho-. Tenemos un carruaje.

-Bien, muy bien... y yo, amigo mío, voy a mi oasis, junto a Fómushka y Fímushka. Pero, ¿sabes lo que te digo, amigo mío? Es absurdo aquello y es absurdo esto... Pero lo absurdo del siglo XVIII está más cerca de la esencia rusa que lo del siglo XX. Adiós, caballeros, yo estoy borracho... pero no se lo tomen a mal. ¡Escuchen lo que les digo! Mejor y más bondadosa que mi hermana... Snandulia... no hay persona en el mundo, y ella... es jorobada y se llama Snandulia. Es siempre así en este mundo. A propósito, el nombre va bien con ella. ¿Saben quién era santa Snandulia? Una mujer virtuosa, que andaba por las cárceles y hospitales curando las heridas de los enfermos. Pero ahora, ¡adiós! ¡Adiós, Nezhdánov... hombre digno de lástima! Y tú, oficial... ¡bah! ¡Misántropo! ¡Adiós!

Se arrastró cojeando y bamboleándose hacia su "oasis", mientras Markélov y Nezhdánov se iban a la estación de posta donde habían dejado el carruaje, hicieron enganchar los caballos, y media hora después seguían ya por la carretera.

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EL cielo estaba cubierto de nubes bajas y aunque no era totalmente de noche y podía verse el pálido brillo de las medas girando sobre la carretera, a la derecha e izquierda estaba totalmente oscuro, y todo se mezclaba en masas pesadas y negras. Era una noche sombría, turbia; el viento soplaba a ráfagas fuertes, arrastrando consigo el olor de la lluvia y de los trigales. Cuando pasaron el grupo de robles que servía de poste de señalización y tomaron un camino lateral, fue aún peor, a veces el camino casi desaparecía... El cochero seguía callado.

-¡Espero que no nos perdamos! -observó Nezhdánov, que había estado callado hasta entonces.

-¡Esperemos que no! -dijo Markélov-. Dos desgracias en el mismo día serían demasiado.

-¿Cuál fue la primera desgracia?

-Un día perdido... ¿no le parece?

-Sí... claro... ¡Este Golushkin! No deberíamos haber bebido tanto. Me duele horriblemente la cabeza.

-Yo no hablo de Golushkin. De cualquier modo, nos dio algún dinero, de manera que nuestra visita no fue del todo inútil.

-Pero seguro que no lamenta que Paklin nos haya llevado a conocer a sus... como les podremos llamar... ¿periquitos?

-No; en cuanto a eso, no hay porqué lamentarse... ni porqué estar alegres. No estoy interesado en esa gente. ¡No me refería a ellos!

-Entonces, ¿a qué?

Markélov no respondió y sólo se retiró un poco más hacia su rincón, como si se escondiera. Nezhdánov no podía verle el rostro, sólo el bigote se le aparecía como una línea negra; pero sentía desde la mañana que había algo en Markélov que era mejor dejar como

estaba, una cosa profunda y misteriosamente desconocida.

-Escuche, Serguéi Mijáilovich -dijo él poco después-, ¿atribuye alguna importancia a las cartas que me prestó hoy de ese tal señor Kisliakov? Si me permite la expresión, ¡no valen nada!

Markélov se enderezó.

-En primer lugar -dijo éste con voz enfadada-, no estoy de acuerdo con su opinión sobre esas cartas y es más: las considero extremadamente notables... ¡y escrupulosas! En segundo lugar, Kisliakov trabaja mucho, y sobre todo... *cree:* cree en nuestra causa, ¡cree en la revolución! Debo decirle, Alexéi Dmítrievich, que *usted,* usted se comporta con nuestra causa como si no creyera en ella.

-¿Qué le hace pensar así? -preguntó Nezhdánov serenamente.

-¿Qué? Todas sus palabras en casa de Golushkin. quién ha dicho que no veía elementos en los que nos pudiéramos apoyar? ¡Usted! ¿Quién exigió que se los mostraran? ¡Aún usted! Y cuando ese amigo suyo, ese bufón vacío, el señor Paklin, levantó los ojos al cielo y aseguró que ninguno de nosotros tenía fuerzas para sacrificarse, ¿quién le aprobó, quién le bajó la cabeza aprobadoramente? ¿No fue usted? Diga lo que quiera, lo que quiera decir de sí mismo... es problema suyo... pero yo conozco personas capaces de abandonar todo lo que es bello en la vida... incluso los seres amados... para servir a sus convicciones, ¡para no traicionarlas! Bien, hoy *usted...* ¡ciertamente no sería capaz de hacerlo!

¿Hoy? ¿Y por qué precisamente hoy?

-Ah, no disimule, por amor de Dios, Don Juan afortunado, amante coronado de mirto -gritó Markélov, olvidando completamente al cochero, que, aunque no se volviera, podía oirlo todo. Es cierto que en aquel momento estaba más preocupado por el camino que por todo lo que los caballeros sentados atrás pudieran decir y que, cuidadosamente, incluso un poco receloso, conducía el caballo, que sacudió la cabeza, retrocedió un poco y arrastró el carruaje por una bajada que no tenía que estar allí.

-Perdón, pero no le comprendo -dijo Nezhdánov.

Markélov rió de una manera forzada, maliciosa.

-¿No me comprende? ¡Ah, ah, ah! Yo lo sé todo, querido señor. Sé a quién usted hizo ayer una declaración de amor, sé a quién usted sedujo con sus aires afectados y bella apariencia, sé quién le deja entrar en su habitación... ¡después de las diez de la noche!

-¡Barin! -gritó el cochero, de repente, a Markélov-. Cójame las riendas... Voy a ver qué es esto... Me parece que nos hemos salido de la carretera... Creo que fuimos por un barranco...

El carruaje estaba, de hecho, totalmente de lado. Markélov cogió las riendas que el cochero le entregaba y prosiguió en el mismo tono de voz:

-No le echo la culpa de ninguna manera, Alexéi Dmítrich. Usted sacó provecho... Tenía toda la razón. Sólo hablo así porque no me gusta su frialdad hacia nuestra causa: le digo de nuevo que no tiene el alma en eso. Y, a propósito, añado: ¿dónde está el hombre que puede premeditadamente prever lo que agrada o no agrada al corazón de una muchacha, o saber lo que ella quiere?

-Ahora comprendo -empezó Nezhdánov-. Comprendo su disgusto, sospecho quién nos espió y se apresuró a comunicarle...

-No depende de los méritos -continuó Markélov, fingiendo que no había oído a Nezhdánov y arrastrando intencionadamente las palabras-. No depende de los atractivos espirituales y físicos... ¡No! Es muy simple... la maldita suerte de todos los hijos ilegítimos, de todos los b...

La última frase fue dicha abruptamente y corriendo, y de golpe se calló, como petrificado.

En la oscuridad, Nezhdánov sintió que empalidecía y empezó a sentir que las mejillas le temblaban. Le fue difícil contenerse y no lanzarse sobre Markélov y cogerle por la garganta. «Sólo la sangre puede lavar esta ofensa, sólo la sangre...»

-¡Ya encontré la carretera! -gritó el cochero, apareciendo junto a la rueda delantera derecha-. Un pequeño equívoco, he girado a la izquierda... ¡No es nada! ¡Animo! Ahora

llegaremos en un momento. ¡Tranquilos!

Subió al asiento, cogió las riendas que Markélov sujetaba, empujó al caballo un poco hacia el lado... el carruaje se sacudió dos veces y después empezó a rodar más suave y calmadamente. La oscuridad parecía apartarse y alzarse, se veía salir una nube de humo de una chimenea. Más adelante, una especie de colina, una luz que temblaba... desapareció... después otra... Un perro ladró...

-Nuestro pueblo -observó el cochero-. ¡Eeh, majos!

Cada vez las luces eran más numerosas.

-Después de la manera como me insultó -dijo finalmente Nezhdánov-, ciertamente comprenderá, Serguéi Mijáilovich, que me es imposible quedarme en su casa, por lo que no tengo otro remedio que pedirle, aunque me sea desagradable, que, cuando lleguemos, me preste el carruaje para volver a la ciudad. Mañana encontraré medios para volver a mi casa. Y entonces recibirá las noticias que sin duda espera de mí.

Markélov no respondió inmediatamente.

-Nezhdánov -dijo, de repente, en voz baja, casi desesperada-, ¡Nezhdánov! Por el amor de Dios, entre conmigo... ¡aunque sea para que yo pueda pedirle perdón de rodillas! ¡Nezhdánov! ¡Olvide... olvide mis absurdas palabras! Ah, ¡si pudiera comprender qué infeliz me siento! -Markélov se pegaba con el puño en el pecho, de donde procedía una especie de gemido-. ¡Nezhdánov! ¡Sé generoso! Dame tu mano... ¡No me niegues el perdón!

Nezhdánov le alargó la mano... indecisamente, pero la alargó. Markélov la cogió con tanta fuerza que casi le hizo gritar.

El carruaje se detuvo en la puerta de la casa de Markélov.

-Escucha, Nezhdánov -le dijo Markélov, un cuarto de hora después, en su despacho-. ¡Escucha!

Ya sólo le trataba de "tú", *y* en ese inesperado *tú,* dirigido a un hombre que reconocía como a un rival con suerte y al que había acabado de insultar, que había deseado matar, cortar en trozos, en ese "tú" había una renuncia irrevocable, una amarga, humilde súplica y una especie de derecho... Nezhdánov reconoció ese derecho y empezó también a tratar a Markélov de *tú.*

-¡Escucha! Te he dicho ahora mismo que desistí de la felicidad del amor, que desistí de ella para servir a mis convicciones... No es verdad, ¡estaba fanfarroneando! El amor nunca me ha sonreído, ¡no he tenido que renunciar a nada! Nací sin suerte y así me he quedado... O quizá sea mejor así. Y en ese caso, tengo que dedicarme a cualquier otra cosa. Si tú puedes combinar una cosa y la otra... amar y ser amado... y al mismo tiempo servir a la causa... ¡muy bien! Te envidio... pero yo... no. No puedo. ¡Eres un hombre feliz! Yo no puedo.

Markélov dijo todo esto en voz baja, sentado en un pequeño taburete, la cabeza inclinada y los brazos caídos a los lados. Nezhdánov estaba de pie delante de él, en una pose de atención pensativa y, aunque Markélov le hubiese considerado un hombre feliz, no parecía sentirse así.

-Fui engañado en la juventud -continuó Markélov-. Era una muchacha formidable, y también me dejó por otro... ¿por quién? ¡Por un alemán! ¡Por un ayudante de campo! Y Marianna...

Calló. Por primera vez había pronunciado aquel nombre que parecía quemarle los labios.

-Marianna no me engañó. Me explicó francamente que yo no le agradaba... ¿No tenía nada que le agradase? Bien, se entregó a ti... ¿Pero qué tiene eso? ¿No es libre para hacerlo?

-¡Ah, espera, espera! -exclamó Nezhdánov-. ¿Qué dices tú? ¿Qué significa ese "se entregó"? Yo no sé qué te escribió tu hermana, pero te aseguro...

-No digo físicamente, sino moralmente, con el corazón, con el alma -interrumpió Markélov, a quien evidentemente había agradado la exclamación de Nezhdánov-. E hizo bien. En cuanto a mi hermana... Sin duda no tenía intención de herirme... o sea, le es indiferente. Pero no hay duda que te odia, a ti y a Marianna. No mintió... pero ¡que se vaya al diablo!

"Sí", pensó Nezhdánov, «nos odia.»

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-Todo va bien -continuó Markélov, sin cambiar de posición-. Las últimas cadenas se han roto, ahora ya nada me estorba. Es igual que Golushkin sea un animal. Sobre las cartas de Kisliakov... quizá sean ridículas, pero hay que dar atención a lo principal. De acuerdo con él... todo está listo en todas partes. ¿No lo crees?

Nezhdánov no respondió.

-Quizá tengas razón, pero si esperamos hasta que las condiciones sean favorables, nunca empezaremos. Si pensamos de antemano en *todas* las consecuencias, ciertamente aún encontraremos algunas más. Por ejemplo: cuando nuestros padres emanciparon a los siervos, no podrían haber previsto que entre los descendientes de esos siervos emancipados aparecería una clase de propietarios usureros, que venden a un mujik cuatro arrobas de centeno podrido por seis rublos, y reciben en cambio -aquí, Markélov levantó un dedo-, primero, trabajo por valor de seis rublos, segundo -Markélov levantó otro dedo-, cuatro arrobas de buen centeno... y aún -Markélov levantó el tercer dedo-intereses. O sea, ¡chupan a los mujiks hasta la última gota de sangre! Debes aceptar que los emancipadores no podían haber previsto esto. Y sin embargo, aunque lo hubieran previsto, hicieron bien en libertar a los siervos... sin medir todas las consecuencias. Es por eso que... me decidí.

Comentario [Librodot-101]: La acción de esta novela transcurre en 1873 y la emancipación de los siervos en Rusia tuvo lugar por decreto de 1861.

Nezhdánov miró a Markélov interrogativamente y sorprendido, pero aquél volvió la mirada hacia el lado, hacia un rincón. Tenía la frente fruncida y los ojos cerrados, se mordía los labios y se mordía el bigote.

-Sí, ¡estoy decidido! repitió, golpeándose con todas sus fuerzas la rodilla con el puño peludo y moreno-. Soy obstinado... y no en vano soy medio pequeñoruso.

Comentario [Librodot-102]: Ucranio.

Después se levantó y, arrastrando las piernas como si estuviera muy débil, entró en su habitación y volvió con un pequeño retrato de Marianna en un marco de cristal.

-Toma -dijo con voz triste pero firme-. Lo hice yo hace tiempo. Dibujo mal, pero puedes ver que se le parece -el retrato a lápiz, de perfil, era realmente parecido.- Toma, hermano, es mi herencia. Con este retrato te doy... no mis derechos... nunca los he tenido... sino, ya sabes... ¡todo! Te lo doy todo... y a ella también. Es una buena muchacha, hermano...

Markélov se calló: su pecho subió visiblemente.

-¡Cógelo! ¿No estás enfadado conmigo? Bien, entonces ¡cógelo! Ahora no me sirve para nada... no me hace falta.

Nezhdánov cogió el retrato, pero una sensación extraña le oprimía el pecho. Le parecía que no tenía derecho a recibir aquel regalo, que, si Markélov supiera lo que pasaba por su corazón, quizá no le diera aquél retrato. Nezhdánov levantó la mano para recibir aquel trozo redondo de cartón, cuidadosamente metido en un marco negro orlado con papel dorado, sin saber qué hacer con él. «Esto que tengo en la mano es la vida entera de un hombre», pensaba. Comprendía el sacrificio que Markélov hacía, pero ¿para qué, para qué precisamente a él? ¿Debía devolver el retrato? ¡No! Eso seria un insulto todavía mayor... Y, después de todo, ¡cuán querido le era aquel rostro, cuánto la amaba!

No sin una cierta desconfianza íntima, Nezhdánov volvió los ojos hacia Markélov... ¿no le miraría? ¿No intentaría adivinar sus pensamientos? Pero Markélov sonrió de nuevo en su rincón y volvió a morderse el bigote.

El viejo criado entró en la sala con una vela en la mano.

Markélov se sobresaltó.

-¡Es hora de ir a dormir, hermano Alexéi! -dijo-. La mañana es más sabia que la noche. Mañana tendrás los caballos y volverás a casa. ¡Adiós!

-¡Adiós también a ti, viejo camarada! -añadió, de repente, volviéndose hacia el criado y dándole una palmada en el hombro-. ¡No estés enfadado!

El viejo quedó tan sorprendido que casi dejó caer la vela; en su mirada, fijada en el barin, había una expresión diferente, completamente distinta a su desánimo habitual.

Nezhdánov se retiró a su habitación. Se sentía mal. Le dolía la cabeza por el vino que había bebido, los oídos le zumbaban, veía luces delante de los ojos aunque los tuviera cerrados. Golushkin, el administrativo Vaska, Fómushka, Fímushka, bailaban delante de él; y la imagen de Marianna, lejos, como si no tuviera confianza, como si no se decidiera a acercarse. Todo lo que había hecho y dicho le parecía tan falso, tan inútil y absurdo... y lo que

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era necesario hacer, lo que tenía que ser continuado, no se sabía dónde estaba, era inalcanzable, estaba bajo siete llaves, en las honduras del infierno...

Y sentía un gran deseo de levantarse, ir a ver a Markélov y decirle: «Coge tu regalo: ¡te lo devuelvo!»

-¡Qué cosa horrible esta vida! -exclamó finalmente.

A la mañana siguiente se marchó muy temprano. Markélov estaba ya en la puerta rodeado de campesinos, pero Nezhdánov no sabía si él los había llamado o si habían venido por su libre iniciativa. Markélov se despidió de él secamente y con pocas palabras... pero parecía que quería comunicarle algo importante. El viejo siervo apareció con su mirada melancólica.

El carruaje dejó rápidamente la ciudad atrás y, entrando en el campo, empezó a rodar a gran velocidad. Los caballos eran los mismos, pero el cochero, que sabía que Nezhdánov vivía en una casa rica, contaba con una buena "propina"... Y ya se sabe: cuando un cochero toma un vaso o espera tomarlo, los caballos corren bien. Era un día de junio, aún fresco. Nubes altas, rápidas, corrían por el cielo azul. A causa de la lluvia de la noche, el viento fuerte, constante, no levantaba polvo de la carretera, pero agitaba las retamas. Brillante y fresco, todo se movía, todo revoloteaba; el grito distante de la codorniz llegaba por encima de los barrancos verdes como si el grito mismo tuviera alas; los grajos brillaban al sol; algunos puntos oscuros, como pulgas, se movían por allí... eran mujiks arando la tierra por segunda vez.

Pero Nezhdánov pasó por todo aquello sin darse cuenta. Estaba tan inmerso en sus pensamientos, que ni siquiera se dio cuenta de que llegaban al pueblo de Sipiaguin.

Se estremeció al avistar el tejado de la casa, el primer piso, la ventana del cuarto de Marianna.

«Sí», pensó, y una ola de calor le entró en el corazón, *»él* tiene razón: ella es una buena muchacha y yo la quiero.»

XXII

SE cambió presurosamente y fue a dar su clase a Kolia. Sipiaguin, que le había encontrado en el comedor, le saludó fría y delicadamente y, murmurando entre dientes: «¿Llegó bien?», se fue a su despacho. En su cerebro ministerial, el estadista había decidido ya, en cuanto las vacaciones terminasen, enviar a San Petersburgo a aquel profesor "extremadamente rojo" y entretanto vigilarle. *Je n'ai pas eu la main heureuse cette fois-ci»,* pensó, «sin embargo... j'auraís *pu tomber pire».* Los sentimientos de Valentina Mijáilovna eran mucho más enérgicos y definidos. Simplemente ya no podía soportarlo. Ser ignorada por un muchacho... Marianna no se había equivocado: Valentina Mijáilovna les había escuchado en el pasillo. La ilustre señora no estaba por encima de esas cosas. Durante aquellos dos días de ausencia de Nezhdánov, aunque no dijo nada a la sobrina "liviana", la hizo entender que lo sabía todo, que estaría indignada si no sintiera tanta lástima de ella, si no la despreciase tanto... Una expresión discreta, íntima, le dominaba el aire un poco burlón y alzaba al mismo tiempo las cejas en señal de vejación mientras miraba a Marianna, cuando le hablaba. Sus ojos maravillosos miraban con una tierna perplejidad, con un disgusto dolorido, aquella muchacha presuntuosa que, después de todas sus "fantasías y excentricidades", había acabado besando, en una habitación oscura, a un estudiantillo cualquiera.

Comentario [Librodot-103]: Esta vez no he tenido mucha suerte... pero podría haber sido peor.

¡Pobre Marianna! Sus labios severos y orgullosos aún no sabían qué eran los besos.

Sin embargo, Valentina Mijáilovna no había contado al marido su descubrimiento; se contentó con dirigir algunas palabras a Marianna, delante del marido, con una sonrisa significativa, que no quería decir nada. Valentina Mijáilovna llegó a lamentar haber escrito a su hermano... Pero acabó por pensar que era mejor que la carta hubiese sido escrita que ahorrarse el arrepentimiento de haberla escrito.

Nezhdánov avistó a Marianna de paso durante el almuerzo, en el comedor. Le pareció que había adelgazado y que estaba más pálida: ese día no tenía buen aspecto, pero la mirada que le dirigió al entrar le fue directa al corazón. Valentina Mijáilovna le miraba constantemente como si le felicitara interiormente: ¡Enhorabuena! ¡Bonito! ¡Muy listo!», y al mismo tiempo intentaba descubrir, por su expresión, si Markélov le habría o no mostrado la carta. Finalmente decidió pensar que sí, que se la había mostrado.

Cuando supo que Nezhdánov había estado en la fábrica de la que Solomin era administrador, Sipiaguin empezó a hacerle preguntas sobre ese "tan curioso administrador industrial", pero en seguida vio, por las respuestas del joven, que aquél no había visto absolutamente nada, y calló majestuosamente, como censurándose el haber esperado cualquier actitud práctica de una persona tan inexperta. Cuando salía del comedor, Marianna consiguió murmurarle: «Espérame en el bosque de abedules, al fondo del jardín. Iré en seguida que me sea posible." Nezhdánov pensó: «Me ha tratado de "tú", -como él.» Y tuvo una sensación muy agradable, aunque algo dolorosa. Qué extraño habría sido -e imposible-, si de golpe ella usara de nuevo el "usted" y si se alejara...

Pensó que eso le habría hecho infeliz. No sabía si la amaba o no, pero que le era querida e íntima y necesaria... sobre todo necesaria... eso lo sentía en todo su ser.

El bosque donde debía esperar a Marianna tenía algunos centenares de grandes abedules, altos y viejos. El viento no se había serenado y las largas ramas enmarañadas eran lanzadas de un lado a otro como trenzas sueltas. Las nubes, como de costumbre, volaban deprisa y altas, y cuando una de ellas tapaba el sol, todo debajo quedaba... no oscuro, sino monocromo. Pero la nube se alejaba... y por todas partes, en un instante, los colores claros centelleaban de nuevo a través del follaje: se mezclaban, brillaban, se sobreponían a las manchas de sombra... ruido y movimiento también; una especie de alegría festiva aumentaba con los colores. Con esa alegría venía la pasión que entra en un corazón triste y perturbado... Y era precisamente un corazón así el que Nezhdánov llevaba en el pecho.

Esperaba apoyado en un tronco de abedul. No sabía realmente lo que sentía, ni quería saberlo, pero era más terrible, y al mismo tiempo más suave, que en casa de Markélov.
Quería, antes que nada, verla, hablarle.. El lazo que súbitamente une dos existencias separadas ya le ataba. Nezhdánov recordó la cuerda que vuela hacia el muelle para amarrar los buques... Una vez atada a un poste, el buque ya no se mueve.

¡A salvo! ¡Gracias a Dios!

De repente, se estremeció. Lejos, en el camino, se distinguía un vestido femenino. Era ella. Pero no sabía si venía en su dirección o si se alejaba, hasta que vio deslizarse las manchas de luz y sombra por su figura, *de abajo hacia arriba...* lo que significaba que venía hacia él. Si se estuviera alejando, las manchas se habrían deslizado *de arriba hacia abajo.* Poco después ella estaba delante de él con una expresión alegre y de bienvenida, un brillo cariñoso en los ojos y una sonrisa satisfecha en los labios. Él cogió su mano extendida, pero no pudo decir una sola palabra; ella se quedó también en silencio. Había caminado muy deprisa y jadeaba un poco, pero parecía satisfecha porque él estaba contento de verla.

Marianna fue quien habló primero.

-Bien -empezó-, dime, ¿qué han decidido? Nezhdánov quedó sorprendido.

-¿Decidido?... Pero ¿había algo que decidir ahora?

-Cuéntame de qué hablasteis. ¿A quién viste? ¿Conociste a Solomin? Cuéntamelo todo... ¡todo! Espera, vamos hacia allí, un poco más adelante. Conozco un sitio... ahí no nos podrán ver.

Le arrastró. El siguió obedientemente tras ella, sobre la hierba alta, poco espesa, seca.

Ella le llevó a donde quería: ante un abedul caído tras una tormenta. Se sentaron sobre el tronco.

-¡Cuéntame! -repitió. Pero después dijo-: ¡Ah! ¡Qué contenta estoy de verte! Me parecía que estos dos días nunca terminarían. Sabes, estoy convencida de que Valentina Mijáilovna nos escuchó.

-Escribió sobre eso a Markélov -observó Nezhdánov.

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-¿Le escribió?

Marianna calló durante un momento y se ruborizó no de vergüenza, sino por otro sentimiento más fuerte.

-¡Es una mujer mala, ruin! -murmuró lentamente-. No tenía derecho a hacer eso... Bien, da igual. ¡Cuéntame, anda!

Nezhdánov empezó a hablar... Marianna le escuchaba con una especie de atención pétrea y sólo le interrumpía cuando se daba cuenta de que él se apresuraba o no daba bastantes detalles. Sin embargo, no todos los detalles de su visita tenían el mismo interés para ella: rió con los de Fómushka y Fímushka, pero no le interesaron. Era una vida demasiado lejana de la suya.

-Es como si me hablaras de Nabucodonosor -observó.

Lo que quería, lo que en realidad le interesaba era saber lo que había dicho Markélov, lo que pensaba Golushkin (aunque hubiese visto en seguida de qué tipo de embustero se trataba) y, sobre todo, las opiniones de Solomin, qué tipo de hombre era. «Pero ¿cuándo? ¿Cuándo? - esta pregunta le venía constantemente a la cabeza, le venía permanentemente a los labios mientras Nezhdánov hablaba. Y él parecía evitar todo lo que pudiese dar una respuesta concreta a esta pregunta. El mismo empezó a notar que destacaba demasiado los detalles que menos interesaban a Marianna... no, no, se volvía hacia él. Las descripciones humorísticas la impacientaban, el tono escéptico y desanimado que Nezhdánov utilizaba la hería... Era necesario mantenerse rígidamente dentro de la "causa" y de las "cuestiones". Por más que hablase de eso, ella no se cansaba. Nezhdánov recordó la época en que aún no estaba en la universidad y pasaba el verano en la dacha de unos amigos y pensó contar unas historias a los niños: tampoco habían prestado atención a las descripciones, a las expresiones, a las sensaciones personales... ¡también querían hechos concretos! Marianna no era un niño, pero lo parecía por la manera directa y simple con que sus sentimientos se manifestaban.

Nezhdánov alabó sincera y calurosamente a Markélov y se refirió a Solomin con particular entusiasmo. Mientras profería las más entusiásticas expresiones sobre éste, se preguntaba qué era lo que le hacía tener una opinión tan elevada de aquel hombre. No había dicho nada particularmente inteligente y algunas de sus palabras eran incluso contrarias a las convicciones de Nezhdánov... «Un tipo equilibrado«, pensó. «Un hombre frío, firme, como dijo Fímushka; un hombre fuerte, de una fuerza calma, constante. Sabe lo que quiere, tiene confianza en sí mismo... y despierta confianza en los otros. No tiene ansiedades... ¡ni desequilibrios! ¡Es ponderado!... Eso es lo principal, y algo que yo no tengo.» Nezhdánov se calló y se abandonó a sus meditaciones. De golpe, sintió una mano en el hombro.

Levantó la cabeza: Marianna le miraba con una expresión solícita y cariñosa.

-Amigo, ¿qué te ocurre? -preguntó ella.

El levantó su mano del hombro y, por primera vez, besó aquella mano pequeña y fuerte. Marianna rió levemente, como sorprendida porque tal galantería le hubiese pasado por la cabeza. Después quedó también pensativa.

-¿Markélov te mostró la carta de Valentina Mijáilovna? -preguntó, por fin.

-Sí.

-Bien... ¿y cómo está él?

¿El? ¡Es el ser más digno y generoso que conozco! El... -Nezhdánov quería hablarle del retrato, pero se enderezó y sólo repitió-: ¡Es el hombre más digno que he conocido!

-¡Oh, sí, sí!

Marianna quedó de nuevo pensativa, y de repente se volvió hacia Nezhdánov y le preguntó con vivacidad: -Bien, ¿y qué habéis decidido?

Nezhdánov se encogió de hombros.

-Ya te he dicho que por el momento no hemos decidido nada. Hay que esperar un poco.

-Esperar... ¿a qué?

-Son las últimas instrucciones recibidas.

«Estoy mintiendo», pensó Nezhdánov.

-¿De quién?

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-¿De quien...? Ya lo sabes... de Vasili Nikoláievich.

Y tenemos que esperar hasta que Ostrodúmov regrese. Marianna miró interrogativamente a Nezhdánov.

-Dime: ¿has visto alguna vez a ese Vasili Nikoláievich?

-Sí. Le vi dos veces... aunque siempre con prisas.

-¿Cómo es? ¿Es cierto que se trata de un hombre extraordinario?

-No sé cómo explicarte. Es nuestro jefe... y quien lo dirige todo. Y, sin disciplina, nuestra causa no marcharía. Tenemos que obedecer a alguien.

«Todo esto es idiota», pensaba Nezhdánov.

¿Cómo es?

¿Cómo? Es bajo, fuerte, moreno... de pómulos salientes, como un calmuco... un rostro rudo. Pero unos ojos muy vivos.

-¿Y cómo habla?

-El no habla: da órdenes.

¿Por qué le hicieron jefe?

-Por su carácter. Nada le hace desviarse. Si es necesario, es capaz de matar. Hay mucha gente que le tiene miedo.

¿Y cómo es Solomin? -preguntó Marianna poco después.

-Solomin tampoco es muy elegante, pero tiene un rostro simple, honesto, simpático. Se encuentran caras así entre los estudiantes.

Nezhdánov había descrito a Solomin correctamente. Marianna le miró durante mucho tiempo... mucho tiempo... y después dijo, como para sí:

-Tú también tienes un rostro simpático. Creo que sería fácil vivir contigo.

Esto conmovió a Nezhdánov, que de nuevo le cogió la mano, se la acercó a sus labios...

-Dejémonos de galanterías -dijo Marianna, riendo. Reía cada vez que le besaba la mano-. Tú no lo sabes, pero hay algo por lo que tengo que pedirte que me excuses.

-¿Qué?

-Bien. Durante tu ausencia fui a tu habitación y encontré sobre la mesa un cuaderno con versos. -Nezhdánov se estremeció: recordó que lo había dejado precisamente sobre la mesa-. Tengo que confesar que no pude resistir a la tentación y lo leí. ¿Son tuyos, aquellos versos?

-Sí. Y ¿sabes una cosa, Marianna? Una de las pruebas más fuertes de mi afecto y confianza hacia ti es el hecho de que casi no estoy enfadado contigo.

¿Casi? ¿Estás entonces un poco enfadado? A propósito, si tu me llamas Marianna yo no puedo llamarte Nezhdánov. Empezaré a llamarte Alexéi. El poema que empieza: «Querido amigo, cuando me muera...» ¿Es tuyo también?

-Sí. Pero, por favor, dejemos eso... No me atormentes.

Marianna movió la cabeza.

-Es un poema muy triste... Espero que lo hayas escrito antes de conocerme. Pero los versos son buenos... hasta donde mis conocimientos me permiten apreciarlos. Creo que podrías ser un literato, pero sé que escogiste algo mayor y más alto que la literatura. La literatura era una buena ocupación, cuando era imposible otra cosa.

Nezhdánov le echó una mirada rápida.

-¿Crees que sí? Estoy de acuerdo. Es mejor la ruina aquí que el éxito allí.

Marianna se puso de pie con dificultad.

-Sí, querido, ¡tienes razón! -exclamó, y todo su rostro se iluminó, ruborizándose de triunfo y emoción-. ¡Tienes razón! Pero quizá no sea la ruina inmediata. Tendremos éxito, verás, seremos útiles, nuestras vidas no serán en vano, vamos hacia el pueblo... ¿Conoces algún oficio? ¿No? Da igual... trabajaremos, llevaremos a nuestros hermanos todo lo que sabemos... yo, si es necesario, seré cocinera, lavandera, costurera... Verás, verás... Y no habrá ningún mérito en eso, sólo felicidad, felicidad...

Marianna calló, pero su mirada se fijó, ansiosa, en la lejanía, no la que estaba delante de ella, sino la otra distancia aún desconocida, que parecía contemplar. Su mirada centelleaba...

Nezhdánov se inclinó por la cintura.

Librodot

-¡Oh, Marianna! -murmuró-. ¡Yo no soy digno de ti! Ella se estremeció.

-¡Es hora de volver! exclamo-. Si no, empezarán a buscarnos. Aunque, por lo que me concierne, me parece que Valentina Mijáilovna ya desistió. Para ella soy ya un caso completamente perdido.

Marianna pronunció esta palabra con una expresión tan luminosa y alegre, que Nezhdánov, mirándola, no pudo dejar de sonreír y repetir:

-¡Un caso perdido!

-Lo que pasa es que ella se siente muy ofendida -añadió Marianna- por no tenerte a sus pies. Pero da igual. De todas formas no puedo quedarme más tiempo en esta casa... Tengo que huir.

-¿Huir? -preguntó Nezhdánov.

-Sí, huir... Tú no te quedarás aquí, ¿verdad? Nos iremos juntos. Trabajaremos juntos... ¿Vendrás conmigo?

-¡Hasta los confines de la tierra! -exclamó Nezhdánov, y la voz le tembló por un momento de emoción y gratitud-. ¡Hasta los confines de la tierra!

En ese instante, habría ido sin discutir hasta donde ella hubiera querido.

Marianna le comprendió y suspiró levemente, feliz.

-Entonces, coge mi mano... pero no la beses... y apriétala con fuerza, como un camarada, como un amigo...

Volvieron juntos a casa, pensativos, felices. La hierba corta les acariciaba los pies, las hojas nuevas susurraban a su alrededor, manchas de luz y sombra daban pequeños saltos, deslizándose ágilmente por sus ropas, y ambos sonreían ante aquel juego perturbador, ante las alegres ráfagas de viento y las hojas frescas y brillantes, ante su propia juventud, y se sonreían uno al otro.

Librodot

Librodot

SEGUNDA PARTE

Librodot

XXIII

LA aurora empezaba ya a surgir cuando, en la noche de la cena en casa de Golushkin, después de haber caminado casi cinco verstas, Solomin llamó a la portalada del alto muro que rodeaba la fábrica. El guardia le dejó entrar inmediatamente y, seguido por tres perros que sacudían las colas con gran satisfacción, le acompañó respetuosamente a sus aposentos. Parecía muy contento de verlo de regreso a salvo.

-¿Cómo es que llega así de noche, Vasili Fedótych? No le esperábamos hasta mañana.

-No tiene importancia, Gavrila, es mucho mejor caminar de noche.

Había las mejores relaciones, extremadamente amistosas, entre Solomin y su personal, que le respetaba como uno de ellos y le consideraba muy culto. A sus ojos era un sabio. «Sea lo que fuere que Vasili Fedótov diga», declaraban, «es sagrado. Porque él lo aprendió todo y ¡no hay ningún inglés que le pueda engañar!» En una ocasión, un conocido industrial inglés había visitado la fábrica y, ya bien sea porque Solomin había hablado con él en inglés, o bien porque estaba realmente impresionado, el caso es que le dio una palmada en la espalda, rió, y le invitó a ir con él a Liverpool. Y dijo a los obreros, con su acento fuerte: «¡Muy bueno esta vuestra hombre, muy bueno!», ante lo que los obreros rieron mucho, no sin un cierto orgullo: «¡Ahí está nuestro hombre!»

Comentario [Librodot-104]: Fedótov y Fedótych son dos formas del mismo patronímico.

Y era de hecho suyo y como ellos.

Por la mañana, muy temprano, entró en la habitación de Solomin su hombre de confianza, Pável, el cual le despertó, le preparó las cosas para lavarse, le contó unas noticias, y le hizo algunas preguntas. Después tomaron té juntos presurosamente, y, después de ponerse su traje de trabajo, gris y hule, Solomin se dirigió a la fábrica, y su vida empezó de nuevo a girar como un gran volante.

Pero tendría una nueva parada.

Cinco días después del regreso de Solomin, entró en el patio de la fábrica un pequeño faetón rojo con cuatro espléndidos caballos y un lacayo de librea verde pálido, que Pável condujo al pequeño edificio, donde entregó solemnemente a Solomin una carta con el sello de armas de "Su Excelencia Boris Andréievich Sipiaguin". En esa carta, que exhalaba no un perfume sino un olor cualquiera inusualmente respetable e inglés y era escrita en tercera persona, no por un secretario sino de la propia mano, el culto propietario del pueblo de Arzhánov se excusaba en primer lugar por dirigirse a una persona que no tenía el honor de conocer personalmente, pero de quien él, Sipiaguin, había oído los mayores elogios, y se atrevía a invitar al señor Solomin a venir a su casa, pues deseaba pedirle su valioso consejo sobre la empresa industrial a la que se había lanzado. Y con la esperanza de que el señor Solomin estuviera de acuerdo amablemente, él, Sipiaguin, le enviaba un carruaje. En el caso de que no le fuera posible ausentarse de la fábrica ese día, él, Sipiaguin, resignadamente pedía al señor Solomin que le indicara otro día en que le fuese posible, y ese mismo carruaje sería, con todo el placer, puesto por él, Sipiaguin, a disposición del señor Solomin. Terminaba con la despedida habitual y, al final, una postdata, ya en primera persona: «Espero que no rechazará almorzar en nuestra casa *sin ceremonia,* traje de paseo.» (Las palabras *sin ceremonia* estaban subrayadas.) Juntamente con esta carta, el lacayo de librea verde claro, con una cierta vacilación, dio a Solomin otra carta, simple y ni siquiera lacrada, únicamente pegada con cola, de Nezhdánov, en la cual sólo había escritas algunas palabras: Venga, por favor. Su presencia es deseada aquí... y podrá ser muy útil, aunque no exactamente al señor Sipiaguin.»

Después de leer la carta de Sipiaguin, Solomin pensó: «Pero ¿de qué manera podría yo ir si no sin ceremonia? En la fábrica no tengo frac... Y ¿por qué demonios debo ir?... ¡Sólo para perder tiempo!», pero cuando pasó los ojos por la nota de Nezhdánov, se rascó la nuca y se dirigió, indeciso, hasta la ventana.

¿Qué respuesta llevaré, por favor? -preguntó arrastradamente el lacayo de librea verde pálido.

Solomin estuvo aún un poco cerca de la ventana y, por fin, se empujó el pelo hacia atrás y pasándose la mano por la frente, dijo:

-Voy con usted. Es sólo el tiempo de arreglarme.

El lacayo salió respetuosamente y Solomin llamó a Pável, tuvo con él una conversación, aún pasó por la fábrica y, vistiendo una levita negra con la cintura muy ancha, hecha por un sastre de provincias, y llevando un sombrero de copa alta un poco descolorido, que inmediatamente dio a su rostro una expresión de madera, se sentó en el faetón, pero de golpe recordó que no llevaba guantes, llamó al omnipresente Pável, que en seguida le trajo un par de guantes blancos de piel acabados de limpiar, cuyos dedos eran tan anchos que parecían bizcochos. Solomin metió los guantes en el bolsillo y dijo que podían partir. Entonces el lacayo, de golpe, con un alarido verdaderamente innecesario, saltó a su asiento, el imponente cochero dio un grito en falsete, y los caballos salieron al galope.

Mientras los caballos llevaban a Solomin a la propiedad de Sipiaguin, éste estaba sentado en su sala de visitas con un panfleto político abierto sobre las rodillas y lo discutía con la mujer. Le confesó que había escrito a Solomin con la intención de hacerle una oferta para que dejara la fábrica del comerciante de tejidos y dirigiera la suya, ya que ésta iba de mal en peor y necesitaba una reorganización total. Sipiaguin estaba totalmente convencido de que Solomin no sólo aceptaría sino que además vendría aquel mismo día aunque él mismo hubiera sugerido otra posibilidad en su carta.

-Pero nuestra fábrica es de papel, no de tejidos -observó Valentina Mijáilovna.

-No tiene importancia, amor mío: ambas tienen máquinas... y él es un mecánico.

-¡Pero quizá sea un especialista!

-Mi querida: en primer lugar, en Rusia no hay especialistas; en segundo lugar, te repito que él es un mecánico.

Valentina Mijáilovna sonrió.

-Cuidado, querido: ya no tuviste suerte con un joven; ¡a ver si no te equivocas una segunda vez!

¿Te refieres a Nezhdánov? Pero me parece que conseguí mi objetivo. Ha sido un buen instructor para Kolia. Y, además, sabes: *non bis in idem!* Perdóname la pedantería, por favor... Quiere decir que las cosas no se repiten.

¿Lo crees? Bien, yo creo que todo en el mundo se repite... sobre todo lo que está en la naturaleza de las cosas... y principalmente en lo que se refiere a los jóvenes.

-Que voulez-vous me dire? -preguntó Sipiaguin, tirando el panfleto sobre la mesa con un gesto gracioso.

Comentario [Librodot-105]: ¿Qué me quiere decir?

-Ouvrez les yeux... et vous verrez! -le contestó la señora Sipiaguin. Cuando hablaban en francés, se trataban de "usted".

Comentario [Librodot-106]: ¡Abra los ojos... y verá!-

-¡Hm! gruñó Sipiaguin-. ¿Te refieres al estudiante?

Sí, al mismo.

-¡Hm! -se pasó la mano por la frente-. ¿Estará él tras algo? ¿Ah?

-¡Abre los ojos!

-¿Marianna? ¿Ah?

El segundo "Ah" fue pronunciado más con la nariz que el primero.

-¡Abre los ojos, te lo digo yo!

Sipiaguin frunció las cejas.

-Bien, tenemos que hablar de eso más tarde. Ahora quiero decirte sólo una cosa... Este Solomin ciertamente se sentirá un poco incómodo... ya lo ves, no está acostumbrado a la alta sociedad. Tenemos que ser amables con él... para que no se sienta intimidado. Claro que no digo esto por ti; tú eres un amor y si te lo propones puedes fascinar a quien quieras. *J'en sois quelque chose, madame!* Lo digo por los otros, sobre todo por ese...

Comentario [Librodot-107]: ¡Tengo experiencia de eso, señora!

Señaló hacia un sombrero gris a la moda que estaba en un estante: era el sombrero del señor Kaloméitsev, que desde la mañana estaba en Arzhánov.

-Il est tres cassant , ya lo sabes. Tiene demasiado desprecio por el pueblo, lo que yo siempre... condeno. En los últimos tiempos, ha estado terriblemente irritable y quisquilloso... ¿O su *asunto...* -Sipiaguin movió la cabeza de una manera indefinida... pero la mujer le com-

Comentario [Librodot-108]: Es muy grosero.

Librodot

prendió- ...no va bien?

-Abre los ojos... te lo digo de nuevo.

Sipiaguin se puso de pie.

¿Ah? -este "¿Ah?" fue pronunciado en un tono ya completamente diferente... mucho más bajo.- ¿Ah, sí? ¡Es bueno que tengan cuidado, por si los abro demasiado!

-Eso es un problema tuyo. Y sobre tu nuevo joven, si viene hoy... no te preocupes. Se tomarán todas las precauciones.

Pero, finalmente, sucedió que no fueron necesarias ningunas precauciones. Solomin no estaba absolutamente nada incómodo o intimidado. Cuando el criado le anunció, Sipiaguin se levantó inmediatamente, exclamando con voz tan alta que podía ser oída desde la entrada:

-¡Háganle entrar, por favor, háganle entrar! -y fue hasta la puerta de la sala de visitas y se quedó esperando. En seguida que Solomin pasó el umbral, casi chocando contra Sipiaguin, éste le extendió las dos manos y, sonriendo amablemente y moviendo la cabeza-: Muy amable... de su parte... le estoy muy agradecido.

Y le condujo hasta Valentina Mijáilovna.

-Mi esposa -dijo, apretando suavemente la palma de la mano contra la espalda de Solomin, como empujándole hacia Valentina Mijáilovna-. Mi querida, aquí está nuestro primer ingeniero mecánico e industrial de la región, Vasili... Fedoséievich Solomin.

La señora Sipiaguin se levantó y, alzando las bellas pestañas de sus maravillosos ojos, primero le sonrió -amablemente, como a un amigo-, después le alargó la mano con la palma hacia arriba y el codo apoyado en la cintura, inclinando la cabeza un poco hacia el lado de la mano... como una suplicante. Solomin dejó que marido y mujer representaran delante de él su pequeña comedia, apretó la mano de ambos, y se sentó a la primera invitación. Sipiaguin empezó por preguntarle si quería tomar algo, pero Solomin respondió que no necesitaba nada, que no estaba de ningún modo cansado del viaje... y que estaba totalmente a su disposición.

-¿Podría entonces pedirle que fuéramos a la fábrica? -exclamó Sipiaguin, un poco avergonzado y sin osar creer en tan gran deferencia por parte de su huésped.

-Inmediatamente -respondió Solomin.

-¡Ah, que amable es! Llamo al carruaje, ¿o desea ir a pie?...

-¿Está cerca, su fábrica?

-Como mucho, media versta.

-Entonces, ¿para qué el carruaje?

-Muy bien, magnífico. Mi sombrero, el bastón, ¡deprisa! Y tú, mayordomo, trata de nuestro almuerzo, ¿de acuerdo? ¡El sombrero!

Sipiaguin estaba mucho más excitado que su invitado. Repitiendo una vez más: «¿Entonces, mi sombrero?», el estadista se echó a correr como un estudiante travieso. Mientras él hablaba con Solomin, Valentina Mijáilovna había mirado furtiva pero atentamente a aquel "nuevo joven". Estaba tranquilamente sentado en el sillón, con las manos en las rodillas (al final, no se había puesto los guantes), muy calmo, aunque con curiosidad, y examinaba el mobiliario, los cuadros. «¿Qué es esto?», pensó ella. «El es un plebeyo... absolutamente un plebeyo... pero ¡actúa con tanta naturalidad!» Solomin se portaba realmente con mucha naturalidad, y no con la intención de ser natural, como si dijera: «¡Vean bien como soy yo!», sino como un hombre cuyos sentimientos y pensamientos son simples, aunque firmes. La señora Sipiaguin quería hablar con él, pero, para espanto suyo, no sabía cómo empezar.

-¡Dios mío! -pensaba-. ¿Es posible que este fabricante me esté impresionando?

-Boris Andreích debe de estarle muy agradecido -dijo ella, finalmente-, por haber aceptado sacrificar algunas horas de su valioso tiempo...

-Mi tiempo no es tan valioso como supone, señora -respondió Solomin-, y además no creo que tardemos mucho.

«Voilá oú l'ours a montré sa pate», pensó ella en francés. Pero, en ese momento, el marido reapareció a la puerta con el sombrero en la cabeza y el stick en la mano. Y, dando media vuelta, exclamó, de una manera familiar:

Comentario [Librodot-109]: He aquí donde el oso muestra la pata.

Comentario [Librodot-110]: Bastón.

Librodot

-¡Vasili Fedóseich! ¡Vamos!

Solomin se irguió, hizo una reverencia a Valentina Mijáilovna, y fue tras Sipiaguin.

-¡Por aquí, por aquí, Vasili Fedóseich! -llamó Sipiaguin, como si cruzara un bosque denso y Solomin necesitara un guía-. ¡Por aquí! Aquí hay unos peldaños, Vasili Fedóseich!

-Si desea llamarme por el nombre de mi padre, dijo lentamente, Solomin-, no soy Fedóseich sino Fedótych.

Sipiaguin le miró por encima del hombro, casi aterrorizado.

-¡Ah, perdón, perdón, Vasili Fedótych!

-No tiene importancia.

Salieron al patio y Kaloméitsev vino a su encuentro. -¿Adónde va? -preguntó éste, mirando de lado a Solomin-. ¿A la fábrica? *C'est la l'individu en ques*tion?.

Comentario [Librodot-111]: ¿Es ese el individuo en cuestión?

Sipiaguin abrió mucho los ojos y sacudió ligeramente la cabeza para avisarlo.

-Sí, vamos a la fábrica... voy a mostrar todos mis pecados y transgresiones a este señor ingeniero mecánico. Permítanme que les presente: el señor Kaloméitsev, un propietario local; el señor Solomin...

Kaloméitsev bajó dos veces la cabeza de un modo casi imperceptible y no hacia Solomin al que ni tan siquiera miró. Pero éste sí miró a Kaloméitsev y en sus ojos semicerrados hubo un brillo súbito.

¿Puedo acompañarles? -preguntó Kaloméitsev-. Ya sabe que me gusta mucho aprender cosas nuevas. -No faltaría más.

Salieron del patio hacia la carretera, y apenas habían dado veinte pasos cuando avistaron al cura, que, vestido con sotana, regresaba a casa. Kaloméitsev dejó a los dos compañeros y, con pasos largos y decididos, se dirigió al padre, que no esperaba aquello, para pedirle su bendición, le dio un beso sonoro en la mano dura y húmeda y, volviéndose hacia Solomin, le echó una mirada de desafio. Era evidente que sabía "algo" y quería exhibirse y divertirse a expensas de ese granuja culto.

-C'est une manifestation, mon cher? -murmuró

Comentario [Librodot-112]: ¿Es una manifestación, querido amigo?

Sipiaguin entre dientes.

Kaloméitsev dio una risotada.

-Oui, mon cher, une manifestation nécessaire par le temps qui court!

Comentario [Librodot-113]: Sí, ¡una manifestación necesaria en los tiempos que corren!

Comentario [Librodot-114]: Ucranio.

Llegaron a la fábrica. Les recibió un pequeñoruso con una enorme barba y dientes postizos, que substituía al anterior administrador, un alemán, a quien Sipiaguin había acabado por echar. Ese pequeñoruso hacía las funciones de administrador con carácter provisional. No entendía nada de nada y sólo sabía repetir: «Eso...» y «¡Claro!» suspirando sin parar. Empezaron a inspeccionar los talleres. Algunos obreros conocían a Solomin de vista y le saludaron. El incluso saludó a uno por su nombre: «¡Buenos días, Grigori! ¡No sabía que estabas aquí!» No tardó en ver que la fábrica iba mal. Se desaprovechaba dinero sin sentido. Las máquinas no eran buenas, muchas eran superfluas y faltaban otras necesarias. Sipiaguin no quitaba los ojos del rostro de Solomin para adivinar su opinión, y con algunas preguntas tímidas, intentaba indagar si consideraba satisfactorio el funcionamento de la fábrica.

-Funciona bien -respondió Solomin-. Pero dudo que haya beneficios.

No sólo Sipiaguin, sino incluso Kaloméitsev sintieron que, en la fábrica, Solomin estaba en su casa, que allí él era el señor. Ponía la mano en una máquina como un jinete la pone en el cuello de su caballo; metía el dedo en una rueda, y ésta paraba o empezaba a girar; hizo derramar en la mano un poco de pulpa de papel y ésta reveló en seguida todos sus defectos. Solomin hablaba poco, ni siquiera miraba al pequeñoruso, hasta que, sin soltar palabra, salió de la fábrica. Sipiaguin y Kaloméitsev le siguieron.

Sipiaguin no quiso que nadie le acompañara... incluso llegó a patear y rechinar los dientes. Estaba muy confuso.

-Por su expresión -dijo éste a Solomin-, veo que mi fábrica no le ha gustado. Yo mismo sé que no va muy bien y que aún no da beneficios. Pero... por favor, sin cumplidos... ¿cuáles son los principales errores? ¿Y qué podría hacer para subsanarlos?

-La fabricación de papel no es mi especialidad -respondió Solomin-, pero una cosa le puedo decir: las empresas industriales no están hechas para la aristocracia.

Librodot

-¿Considera esa ocupación degradante para la aristocracia? -se metió Kaloméitsev.

Solomin sonrió con su sonrisa ancha.

-No, no, por favor. No tiene nada de degradante. Y aunque lo tuviera, no me parece que a la aristocracia le preocupara mucho eso.

-¿Cómo? ¿Cómo?

-Sólo quiero decir -continuó Solomin con calma-, que los propietarios rurales no están acostumbrados a este tipo de negocio. Es necesario un conocimiento comercial, todo tiene que mirarse de otra manera. Hace falta tenacidad. Los propietarios no acaban de entenderlo. Ya hemos visto cómo fundaban fábricas de lana, algodón y otras. Pero ¿quién acaba siempre por quedarse con todas esas fábricas? Los comerciantes. Y es una lástima, porque los comerciantes son aún peores sanguijuelas. Pero no se puede hacer nada al respecto.

-Quien le oiga -exclamó Kaloméitsev-, pensará que nuestra aristocracia no sabe ocuparse de cuestiones financieras.

-¡Oh, al contrario! Son maestros en eso. Para recibir concesiones de ferrocarriles, fundar bancos, eludir cualquier impuesto o cualquiera de esas cosas... ¡no hay como la aristocracia! Hacen grandes fortunas. Iba ahora mismo a referirme a eso cuando me interrumpió. No; no quisiera molestarles, yo venía refiriéndome a empresas industriales normales. Digo normales porque abrir tabernas propias, pequeños colmados, o prestar trigo o dinero a los mujiks al ciento cincuenta por ciento, como hacen hoy muchos propietarios... no puedo considerarlo como una operación de tipo financiero.

Kaloméitsev no contestó. Él pertenecía precisamente a esa nueva especie de propietarios usureros a la que se refería Markélov en su última conversación con Nezhdánov, y era tanto más inhumano en sus exigencias en la medida en que no tenía contactos personales con los campesinos. Nunca les dejaba entrar en su despacho europeo y perfumado, y trataba con ellos a través del casero. Hervía de rabia al oír el habla lenta, imparcial, de Solomin... pero se calló por esa vez, y sólo el movimiento de los músculos de su cara traicionaba lo que pasaba dentro de sí.

-De todas formas, permítame, permítame, Vasili Fedótych -empezó Sipiaguin-, todo lo que acaba de decir quizá pasaba en otros tiempos, cuando la aristocracia disfrutaba... de otros privilegios y se encontraba en otra posición. Pero ahora, después de todas las benéficas reformas de nuestra era industrial, ¿por qué razón la aristocracia no puede dedicar su atención, sus facultades, vaya, a empresas de este tipo? ¿Por qué no puede un aristócrata comprender lo que un simple, y a menudo iletrado, comerciante puede comprender? Tienen educación e incluso me atrevería a decir sin exagerar que, en cierta manera, los aristócratas son los representantes de la instrucción y del progreso.

Boris Andréievich habló muy bien; su elocuencia tendría mucho éxito en San Petersburgo, en su departamento, o incluso más arriba, pero no obtuvo ningún efecto sobre Solomin.

-Los aristócratas no son capaces de administrar esta clase de negocios -repitió.

-Pero ¿por qué? ¿Por qué? casi gritó Kaloméitsev. -Porque son muy burocráticos.

-¿Burocráticos? -rió Kaloméitsev, de una manera mordaz-. ¡El señor Solomin no debe de haber meditado bien su respuesta!

Solomin no dejó de sonreír.

-¿Por qué piensa eso de mi respuesta, señor Kalloméntsev? -Kaloméitsev se estremeció al oír su apellido así mutilado-. No, tengo perfecta consciencia de mis palabras.

-Entonces, ¡explique lo que quiso decir con su frase!

-Naturalmente: en mi opinión el burócrata es un extraño y siempre lo ha sido. Y el aristócrata hoy día se *volvió* extraño.

Kaloméitsev rió aún más.

-Pero, perdone, querido señor, ¡no comprendo lo que dice!

-Tanto peor para usted. Haga un esfuerzo... ¡quizá acabe por comprender!

-¡Señor!

-Señores, señores -dijo Sipiaguin apresuradamente, intentando coger la mirada de uno

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de ellos-. Por favor... *Kallomeïtzeff, je vous prie de vous calmer.* El almuerzo debe de estar listo. ¡Vamos, caballeros, acompáñenme!

Comentario [Librodot-115]: Kaloméitsev, le pido que se tranquilice.

-¡Valentina Mijáilovna! -gritó Kaloméitsev cinco minutos después, entrando en su salón privado-. ¡No comprendo qué quiere hacer su marido! Primero, trajo a un nihilista, y ahora trae otro. ¡Y éste es aún peor!

¿Por qué?

-Defiende no se sabe qué, y, a pesar de que hace una hora que habla con su marido, ni una sola vez, *ni una,* le ha tratado de Vuestra Excelencia! *Le vagabond!*

Comentario [Librodot-116]: ¡El vagabundo!

XXIV

ANTES del almuerzo, Sipiaguin llamó a su mujer a la biblioteca. Quería hablar con ella a solas. Parecía preocupado. Le explicó que la fábrica iba realmente mal, que este Solomin le parecía un hombre muy competente, aunque un poco... duro, y que era necesario continuar con él *aux petits* soins.

Comentario [Librodot-117]: Siendo amable.

-¡Ah, qué bien nos iría! -repitió dos veces.

Estaba muy preocupado por la presencia de Kaloméitsev.

-¡Qué diablos! ¡Ve nihilistas por todas partes y sólo piensa en aniquilarlos! Bien, ¡que los aniquile en su casa! Pero ¡no puede apretar la lengua entre los dientes!

Valentina Mijáilovna observó que estaría encantada de dedicarse *aux petits soins* con el nuevo invitado, pero le parecía que éste no necesitaba esos *petíts soins y* que, además, no les daba importancia; no de una manera brusca, sino con indiferencia, lo que era sorprendente en un hombre *du común.*

Comentario [Librodot-118]: Plebeyo.

-Da igual... ¡inténtalo! -pidió Sipiaguin.

Valentina Mijáilovna prometió intentarlo, y lo intentó. Empezó por tener una conversación *en téte-á-téte* con Kaloméitsev. Lo que le dijo es un secreto, pero el caso es que él fue a la mesa con el aire de un hombre que decidió ser discreto y sumiso por más que le costara. Esta "resignación" dio a todo su porte un ligero toque de melancolía. Y qué dignidad... oh, ¡qué dignidad había en todos sus movimientos! Valentina Mijáilovna presentó a Solomin a todos... (él miró más atentamente a Marianna que a los otros) y en la mesa lo sentó a su derecha. Kaloméitsev quedó a su izquierda. Al desdoblar la servilleta, torció los ojos y sonrió como si quisiera decir: «Bien, bien, ¡vamos entonces a representar nuestra comedia!» Sipiaguin se sentó delante y le miraba con una cierta ansiedad. Según un nuevo arreglo de la señora de la casa, Nezhdánov fue colocado no al lado de Marianna, sino entre Anna Zajárovna y Sipiaguin. Marianna encontró su tarjeta (porque el almuerzo al final fue de ceremonia) en la servilleta entre Kaloméitsev y Kolia. El almuerzo fue servido de forma espléndida; había incluso un "menú": una hoja escrita delante de cada persona. Inmediatamente después de la sopa, Sipiaguin llevó de nuevo la conversación hacia su fábrica y a la producción industrial en Rusia. Solomin respondía, como era su costumbre, con frases muy cortas. Tan pronto como Solomin empezó a hablar, Marianna fijó la mirada en él. Kaloméitsev, que estaba sentado al lado de la muchacha, empezó a dirigirle varias galanterías (se le había pedido que "no empezara ninguna discusión"), pero ella ni siquiera le escuchaba, y él, realmente, decía sus galanterías contrariado, sin convicción: reconocía que entre él y aquella muchacha había algo que no se podía traspasar.

Comentario [Librodot-119]: Íntima.

En cuanto a Nezhdánov, flotaba en el ambiente que las cosas no iban bien entre él y el señor de la casa... Para Sipiaguin, Nezhdánov había pasado a ser simplemente una pieza del mobiliario o un espacio vacío, que aquél ignoraba por completo. Estas nuevas relaciones eran tan evidentes, que cuando Nezhdánov, durante la cena, dijo algunas palabras en respuesta a una observación de su vecina, Anna Zajárovna, Sipiaguin miró alrededor sorprendido, como si preguntara: «¿De dónde viene este sonido?»

Evidentemente, Sipiaguin poseía algunas de las características por las que son admirados ciertos burócratas rusos.

Después del pescado, Valentina Mijáilovna que, por su lado, dirigía todos sus encantos y toda su seducción hacia la derecha, o sea, hacia Solomin, observó en inglés al marido que "nuestro invitado no bebe vino, quizá prefiera cerveza..." Sipiaguin mandó en voz alta que trajeran «ale», pero Solomin, dirigiéndose a Valentina Mijáilovna, le dijo:

Comentario [Librodot-120]: Cerveza inglesa.

-Quizá ignore, señora, que estuve dos años en Inglaterra... y que hablo y entiendo el inglés. Se lo digo por si acaso quisiera decir algún secreto en mi presencia.

Valentina Mijáilovna rió y le aseguró que la precaución era innecesaria, porque respecto a él no oiría nada que no fuera bueno, pero interiormente consideró la actitud de Solomin un poco extraña, aunque en cierta manera delicada.

Sin embargo, Kaloméitsev acabó por no poder contenerse más.

-Entonces, estuvo en Inglaterra -empezó-. Y probablemente aprecia los costumbres de allá. ¿Puedo preguntarle si los considera dignos de ser imitados?

-Unos sí, otros no.

-Breve... pero poco claro -observó Kaloméitsev, intentando no darse cuenta de las señas que le hacía Sipiaguin-. Pero hace poco hablaba de la aristocracia... Seguro que tuvo ocasión de estudiar *in loco* aquello que los ingleses llaman *landed gentry*?

Comentario [Librodot-121]: Propietarios de tierras que no pertenecen a la aristocracia.

-No, no tuve esa oportunidad. Me moví en una esfera totalmente diferente. Pero me hice una idea de esos señores.

¿Y qué? ¿Cree que una *landed gentry* como esa es imposible entre nosotros? ¿O que no la debemos desear?

-En primer lugar, creo que precisamente es imposible. En segundo lugar... no vale la pena desearla.

-¿Y por qué? ¿Y por qué? -exclamó Kaloméitsev.

Esa repetición delicada la destinaba a calmar a Sipiaguin, que estaba muy agitado e inquieto en su silla. -Porque dentro de veinte o treinta años, su *landed gentry,* de todas formas, ya no existirá.

-Pero, por favor, dígame por qué.

-Porque por entonces la tierra tendrá propietarios sin distinción de origen.

-¿Comerciantes?

-Probablemente en su mayor parte comerciantes.

-¿Y cómo pasará eso?

-La compran, la compran.

-¿A la aristocracia?

-A los señores aristócratas.

Kaloméitsev sonrió con condescendencia.

-Recuerde que dijo de las fábricas precisamente lo mismo que dice ahora de la tierra.

-Naturalmente.

-¡Y usted quedará, sin duda, muy satisfecho!

-De ninguna manera. Como ya le dije, el pueblo no ganará nada con el canje.

Kaloméitsev levantó ligeramente una mano.

-¡Qué desvelo por el pueblo, caramba!

-¡Vasili Fedótych! -llamó Sipiaguin con toda la energía-. ¡He aquí su cerveza! *Voyons, Siméon!* -añadió en voz baja.

Comentario [Librodot-122]: ¡Entonces, Simeón!

Pero Kaloméitsev no se calmó.

-Veo -dijo éste de nuevo, dirigiéndose a Solomin-, que no le gustan mucho los comerciantes. Pero ellos salieron del pueblo, ¿verdad?

-Exactamente.

-¡Creía que consideraba magnífico todo lo que fuese del pueblo o que se relacionase con él!

-¡Oh, no! Está totalmente equivocado. Nuestro pueblo puede ser censurado por muchas cosas, aunque no siempre sea culpa suya. Nuestros comerciantes son unos explotadores y utilizan su capital con ese objetivo... Pero, ¿qué hacer? Es la ley del más fuerte... Pero el pueblo...

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-El pueblo ¿qué? -preguntó Kaloméitsev en falsete. -El pueblo está dormido.

-¿Y a usted le gustaría despertarlo?

-No seria malo.

-¡Aha! ¡Aha! He aquí...

-Por favor, por favor -exclamó Sipiaguin imperativamente. Comprendió que había llegado el momento de poner, por decirlo de alguna manera... fin a la discusión. ¡Y lo hizo! Con un gesto leve de la mano derecha, mientras el codo quedaba sobre la mesa, inició un largo y detallado discurso. Por un lado, elogió a los conservadores, por otro... valoró a los liberales, prefiriendo a éstos y considerándose uno de ellos. Exaltó al pueblo, pero mostró algunas de sus debilidades; expresó su plena confianza en el gobierno... pero se preguntó si todos los funcionarios cumplían sus benevolentes objetivos. Reconoció plenamente la importancia de la literatura, pero declaró que sin el mayor cuidado era inaceptable. Se giró hacia occidente: primero suspiró, después quedó entusiasmado. Y, por fin, propuso un brindis en honor de la trinidad: ¡Religión, Agricultura e Industria!

-¡Bajo el ala del poder! -añadió severamente Kaloméitsev.

-¡Bajo el ala de la autoridad sensata y benévola! -le corrigió Sipiaguin.

El brindis fue bebido en silencio. El espacio vacío llamado Nezhdánov, a la izquierda de Sipiaguin, hizo, es cierto, varios ruidos de desaprobación, pero, no habiendo desviado la atención de nadie, se aquietó de nuevo y, sin ninguna nueva controversia, la cena llegó a una feliz conclusión.

Valentina Mijáilovna, con su sonrisa más agradable, entregó a Solomin una jícara de café. Este la tomó y buscaba ya el sombrero con la vista... cuando, cogiéndole amablemente por el brazo, Sipiaguin le llevó al despacho. Primero le ofreció un excelente puro, después le hizo una proposición para que entrara a trabajar en su fábrica con las condiciones más ventajosas.

-Será señor absoluto, Vasili Fedótych, ¡señor absoluto!

Solomin aceptó el puro, pero rechazó la proposición. Y mantuvo su rechazo, por más que Sipiaguin insistiera.

-¡No diga "no" de entrada, mi querido Vasili Fedótych! ¡Diga, por lo menos, que se lo pensará hasta mañana!

-Pero ¿qué diferencia hay? No puedo aceptar su ofrecimiento.

-¡Piénselo hasta mañana, Vasili Fedótych! No le cuesta mucho, ¿verdad que no?

Solomin dijo que no le costaba nada... y salió del despacho y de nuevo buscó el sombrero. Pero Nezhdánov, que aún no había tenido oportunidad de poder cruzar una sola palabra con él, se acercó y le murmuró apresuradamente:

-Dios mío, ¡no se vaya! ¡Necesitamos hablar! Solomin dejó el sombrero en paz, y Sipiaguin, viendo su indecisión, caminando de un lado a otro, exclamó: -¿No seria mejor que pasara aquí la noche?

-Como quiera -aceptó Solomin.

La mirada agradecida que le envió Marianna, que estaba de pie junto a la ventana, le dejó pensativo.

XXV

HASTA SU llegada, Marianna había imaginado a Solomin muy diferente. A primera vista le pareció indefinido, incaracterístico... ¡Decididamente, ya había visto muchos de aquellos hombres rubios, delgados y robustos! Pero cuanto más le observaba, cuanto más le escuchaba, más aumentaba su sentimiento de confianza en él. Aquel hombre tranquilo, aunque no torpe, era incapaz de mentir o de fanfarronear y cualquier persona podía apoyarse en él como en una pared de piedra... El no traicionaría, sino que comprendería y ayudaría. Marianna tuvo incluso la sensación de que Solomin despertaba la misma sensación en todos

los presentes. Lo que decía no tenía gran sentido para ella (poco le interesaban comerciantes y fábricas), pero su manera de mirar y sonreír... le agradaban sobremanera...

Un hombre honesto... ¡eso era lo principal! Fue eso lo que más le llegó de él. Aunque no sea un hecho bien conocido, los rusos son los mayores mentirosos en toda la faz de la tierra. Pero no hay nada que respeten tanto como la verdad, no hay nada con que simpaticen más. Así, a los ojos de Marianna, Solomin surgió rodeado de un halo especial, como al hombre a quien el mismo Vasili Nikoláievich había recomendado a sus seguidores. Durante el almuerzo, Marianna varias veces intercambió con Nezhdánov miradas «sobre él» y, hacia el final, se encontró involuntariamente comparando a los dos, y no precisamente con ventaja para Nezhdánov. El rostro moreno de Nezhdánov era, sin duda, bastante más bello y agradable que el de Solomin, pero expresaba una confusión de las más variadas sensaciones: vejación, entorpecimiento, impaciencia... incluso desánimo. Parecía estar a la que salta, intentaba hablar... pero no lo hacía, reía nerviosamente... Solomin, por lo contrario, daba la impresión de estar un poco aburrido, pero, por otro lado, parecía estar en su casa y no tener nada que ver con lo que pasaba a su alrededor. «Debemos pedir el consejo de este hombre», pensó Marianna. «Seguro que nos dirá algo útil.» Fue *ella* quien envió a Nezhdánov a hablar con él después del almuerzo.

La tarde pasó muy lentamente. Por suerte, el almuerzo terminó tarde y faltaba poco para la noche. Kaloméitsev estaba malhumorado y no habló más.

-¿Qué le pasa? -le preguntó la señora Sipiaguin medio juguetona-. ¿Ha perdido algo?

-Precisamente -respondió Kaloméitsev-. ¿Conoce la historia de aquel oficial de la guardia que perdió un "calcetín"?... «¡Encuéntrenme ese calcetín!», decía él. Y yo digo: «¡Encuéntrenme la palabra *señor!»* La palabra *señor* se perdió... y con ella todo el respeto por la posición!

La señora Sipiaguin informó a Kaloméitsev que no le ayudaría en su búsqueda.

Alentado por el éxito de su "speech" durante el almuerzo, Sipiaguin hizo dos más, en los que exhibió varias reflexiones de estadista sobre medidas indispensables y varios gracejos *-des mots-* no tan divertidos como pesados, que había preparado especialmente para San Petersburgo. Hasta repitió uno de esos gracejos, diciendo anticipadamente:

-Si me permiten la expresión.

Y sobre uno de los ministros dijo que tenía un cerebro perezoso y frívolo y que tenía la costumbre de soñar. Por otro lado, sin olvidar que trataba con un ruso y con un hombre del pueblo, no perdió la oportunidad de intentar mostrar que él mismo era un ruso por los cuatro costados y muy cercano a las raíces de la vida nacional. Así, por ejemplo, a la observación de Kaloméitsev de que la lluvia podía perjudicar la cosecha de centeno, respondió inmediatamente que "Si el centeno es negro -el trigo será blanco"; y utilizó varios proverbios como: "Más vale buen vecino que pariente ni primo", "Gato escaldado del agua fría huye", "Pan y vino andan camino, que no mozo garrido", "Si por San Ígor las hojas de abedul son del tamaño de un real -por la Virgen de Kazán la pasta puede ir al horno". Es cierto que a veces, de golpe, se equivocaba, y decía, por ejemplo, "A caballo diente no le mires el regalado" o "Cuanto más poco a poco más deprisa!" Pero la sociedad en la que estos engaños ocurrían ni siquiera sospechaba que *"notre bon* ruso" se había equivocado y, gracias al príncipe Kovrizhkin, esa sociedad estaba acostumbrada a semejantes proverbios equivocados. Y Sipiaguin los pronunciaba con una voz especial, fuerte, incluso un poco ronca *-d'une voix rustique* [(128)]*.* Proverbios como éstos, proferidos en el momento y el lugar adecuado en San Petersburgo, hacían que las damas influyentes exclamaran: *«Comme il connait bien les moeurs de notre* peuple!» *Y* los grandes e influyentes estadistas añadieran: *«¡Les moeurs et les besoins!»*

Valentina Mijáilovna no paró de revolotear alrededor de Solomin, pero su fracaso la desanimó y, al pasar cerca de Kaloméitsev, dijo involuntariamente, en voz baja:

-*Mon dieu, que je suis* fatiguée!

A lo que éste respondió con una reverencia irónica:

-*¡Tu l'as volu, Georges* Dandin!

Por fin, después de la habitual explosión de amabilidades y cumplidos, que se da en

Comentario [Librodot-123]: Discurso.

Comentario [Librodot-124]: Polushka: moneda de un cuarto de copec.

Comentario [Librodot-125]: Nuestro buen.

Comentario [Librodot-126]: «¡Qué bien conoce las costumbres de nuestro pueblo!»

Comentario [Librodot-127]: ¡Las costumbres y las necesidades!

Comentario [Librodot-128]: ¡Dios mío, que cansada estoy!

Comentario [Librodot-129]: ¡Así lo quisiste, Georges Dandin!

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todos los rostros en el momento en que acaba una reunión aburrida; después de súbitos apretones de manos, sonrisas y gangueos, invitados y anfitriones, mutuamente cansados, se separaron.

Solomin, a quien había correspondido casi la mejor habitación del segundo piso, con accesorios ingleses de toilette y baño, fue al encuentro de Nezhdánov.

Éste empezó por agradecerle calurosamente que hubiese aceptado quedarse.

-Sé... que para usted es un sacrificio...

-¡No piense en ello! -respondió apresuradamente

Solomin-. ¿Qué sacrificio? Además, *a usted* no le podría decir que no.

¿Por qué?

-Porque le aprecio mucho.

Nezhdánov quedó satisfecho y sorprendido, mientras Solomin le apretaba la mano. Después éste se sentó en una silla, encendió un puro y, apoyando los codos contra el respaldo de la silla, preguntó:

-Entonces, ¿qué hay?

¿Pregunta qué hay?... Es que yo quiero huir de aquí.

-O sea, quiere dejar esta casa. Pero nadie se lo impide.

-No quiero dejarla... quiero huir.

-Pero, ¿alguien le detiene? ¿Recibió quizá dinero anticipado? En ese caso, basta que me diga... será un placer...

-No me comprende, mi querido Solomin... Yo dije huir y no dejar, porque no salgo solo.

Solomin levantó la cabeza.

-Entonces ¿con quién?

-Con la muchacha que vio aquí hoy...

-¡Con ella! Tiene una expresión simpática. ¿Y qué? ¿Se quieren?... O... ¿decidieron dejar juntos esta casa sólo porque no les gusta vivir aquí?

-Nos queremos.

-¡Ah! -Solomin quedó callado-. ¿Y ella es pariente de la familia?

-¡Sí! Pero comparte plenamente nuestras convicciones... y está preparada para todo.

Solomin sonrió.

-Y usted, Nezhdánov, ¿está preparado?

Nezhdánov frunció ligeramente la frente.

-¿A qué viene esta pregunta? Cuando llegue el momento, se lo demostraré.

-Yo no dudo de usted, Nezhdánov. Sólo lo pregunté porque, además de usted, no me parece que nadie más esté preparado.

-¿Y Markélov?

-Sí, es cierto, Markélov. Pero ese nació ya preparado.

En aquel momento, alguien llamó a la puerta deprisa y levemente y la abrió sin esperar respuesta. Era Marianna, que se dirigió en seguida a Solomin.

-Estoy segura -empezó ella-, de que no está sorprendido de verme aquí a esta hora. Él -Marianna señaló a Nezhdánov- ciertamente ya le explicó todo. Déme su mano... y sepa que tiene ante sí a una muchacha honesta.

-No tengo la más mínima duda -dijo Solomin muy serio. Se había levantado de su silla en seguida que Marianna apareció-. Mientras la observaba en la mesa, pensé: ¡qué mirada tan honesta tiene aquella bárishnia! Precisamente Nezhdánov acaba de hablarme de las intenciones que tienen. Pero, exactamente... ¿por qué quiere huir?

-¿Por qué? Porque la causa con la que estoy de acuerdo... no se sorprenda, Nezhdánov no me ocultó nada..., la gran empresa debe empezar dentro de poco... y ¿podría yo quedarme en esta casa, donde todo es mentira y falsedad? Las personas que yo quiero correrán peligro, y yo...

Con un movimiento de la mano, Solomin hizo que se calmara.

-No se alarme. Siéntese y yo me sentaré también. Siéntese usted también, Nezhdánov. Escuchen: si no tienen otra razón para huir, no hay por qué hacerlo ya. Esa gran empresa no

empezará tan pronto como piensa. Es necesario todavía un poco de prudencia. No sirve para nada lanzarse hacia adelante en vano. ¡Créanme!

Marianna se sentó y se envolvió en una gran manta, que se había puesto sobre los hombros.

-¡Pero yo no puedo quedarme aquí más tiempo! Todos me insultan. Hoy mismo Anna Zajárovna, la muy estúpida, me dijo, delante de Kolia y refiriéndose a mi padre, que ¡las manzanas nunca se alejan mucho del manzano! Kolia quedó sorprendido y preguntó qué quería decir eso. ¡Y no hablo ya de Valentina Mijáilovna!

Solomin volvió a calmarla de nuevo, pero esta vez con una sonrisa. Marianna creyó que Solomin se burlaba de ella, pero aquella sonrisa nunca podría ofender a nadie.

-Pero ¿qué es eso, querida bárishnia? Yo no sé quién es esa Anna Zajárovna, ni a qué manzano se refiere... pero recuerde una cosa: una mujer tonta le dice cosas tontas y ¿usted no puede soportarlo? Entonces ¿cómo va a poder vivir? El mundo está lleno de personas estúpidas. No, eso no es razón. ¿No tiene otra?

-Estoy convencido -se interpuso Nezhdánov con voz profunda-, de que mañana el señor Sipiaguin me echará de su casa. Algo deben haberle contado, se dirige a mí de una manera... con el mayor desprecio.

Solomin se volvió hacia Nezhdánov.

-Entonces ¿por qué quiere huir, si él mismo le echa? Nezhdánov no supo qué responder.

-Ya le expliqué -empezó.

-El dijo eso -se metió Marianna-, porque yo le acompaño.

Solomin la miró y movió la cabeza con benevolencia.

-Si es así, querida bárishnia, le digo de nuevo: si quiere dejar esta casa porque cree que la revolución está al llegar...

-Precisamente por eso le pedimos que se quedara -interrumpió Marianna-, para saber exactamente en qué estado están las cosas.

-En ese caso -continuó Solomin-, repito: aún puede quedarse sentada en casa bastante tiempo. Pero si quieren huir porque se aman y no pueden unirse de otro modo, en ese caso...

¿En ese caso?

-En ese caso sólo me queda desearles que sean felices. Y si es necesario y posible, ofrecerles toda mi ayuda. Porque, querida bárishnia, ambos me han gustado mucho a primera vista, como si fueran hermanos míos.

Marianna y Nezhdánov se acercaron por ambos lados y cada uno le cogió una mano.

-¡Díganos sólo lo que tenemos que hacer! -imploró Marianna-. Aunque la revolución esté lejos... hay que hacer un trabajo preparatorio difícil, que en esta casa, en este ambiente, no es posible... Guíenos, díganos adónde debemos ir... ¡Envíenos a donde quiera! ¿Hará eso por nosotros?

-¿Hacia dónde?

-Hacia el pueblo... ¿Hacia dónde podremos ir si no hacia el pueblo?

«Hacia el bosque», pensó Nezhdánov recordando las palabras de Paklin.

Solomin miró fijamente a Marianna.

¿Quiere conocer el pueblo?

-Sí. O sea... no queremos sólo conocer el pueblo, sino trabajar... sufrir por él.

-Muy bien, le prometo que lo conocerá. Voy a darle la posibilidad de trabajar... y sufrir por él. Y usted, ¿Nezhdánov, está preparado para ir... con ella... y con el pueblo?

-¡Claro que sí! -dijo él apresuradamente. «Jaggernaut», recordó la otra palabra de Paklin. «Aquí viene el enorme carro... y yo escucho el girar de sus ruedas.»

-Muy bien -repitió Solomin, pensativo-. Pero ¿cuándo pretenden huir?

-Si es posible, mañana exclamó Marianna.

-Muy bien. Pero, ¿adónde irán?

-Sst... sst... -susurró Nezhdánov-. Alguien va por el pasillo.

Todos callaron.

-¿Adónde quieren ir? -preguntó de nuevo Solomin, bajando la voz.

-No lo sabemos -respondió Marianna.

Solomin miró a Nezhdánov. Pero éste sólo giró la cabeza en señal de negación.

Solomin alargó la mano y cogió cuidadosamente la vela.

-En ese caso, hijos míos -dijo por fin-, vengan junto a mí, a la fábrica. No es un ambiente muy acogedor... pero no es peligroso. Yo les ocultaré. Tengo un pequeño apartamento libre. Nadie les encontrará. Es suficiente que consigan llegar hasta allí... y no les entregaremos. Piensen que en una fábrica hay mucha gente. Y esto es una ventaja. Donde hay gente es más fácil pasar inadvertido. ¿Vendrán?

-Sólo nos queda agradecer -exclamó Nezhdánov. Pero Marianna, a quien la idea de la fábrica en un principio había dejado perpleja, añadió vivamente:

-¡Claro! Pero no nos va a dejar mucho tiempo allá, ¿verdad? ¿A dónde nos enviará?

-Eso dependerá de ustedes... En el caso de que quieran casarse, también se puede arreglar eso en la fábrica. Tengo un vecino cerca, un primo llamado Zósimo, que es cura y es muy simpático. Les casará con el mayor placer.

Marianna sonrió, mientras Nezhdánov una vez más apretó la mano de Solomin, esta vez un poco asustado:

-Y el amo, el propietario de la fábrica, ¿no se enfadará? ¿No le causará problemas?

Solomin miró de lado hacia Nezhdánov.

-No se preocupe por mí. Es simplemente innecesario. Mientras las cosas vayan bien en la fábrica, mi amo no se preocupa. Y usted y su amada bárishnia no tienen nada que temer de él. Ni de los obreros. Díganme sólo a qué hora les debo esperar.

Nezhdánov y Marianna se miraron.

-Pasado mañana, temprano, o al día siguiente -dijo finalmente Nezhdánov-. No podemos esperar más tiempo. Esto en el caso de que no me echen mañana.

-Bien... -dijo Solomin levantándose de su silla-. Les esperaré cada mañana. No saldré durante toda la semana. Tomaré todas las precauciones.

Marianna se acercó a él, camino de la puerta.

-Adiós, mi querido y bondadoso Vasili Fedótych... es este su nombre, ¿verdad?

-Exactamente.

-Adiós... o mejor, ¡hasta la vista! Y gracias, ¡muchas gracias!

-Adiós... ¡Buenas noches!

-¡Adiós, Nezhdánov! Hasta mañana... -añadió ella. Y salió.

Los dos jóvenes quedaron algún tiempo inmóviles y callados.

-Nezhdánov... -empezó finalmente Solomin, y se calló-. Nezhdánov... -empezó de nuevo-, háblame de esta chica... dígame todo lo que pueda. ¿Qué vida fue la suya hasta hoy?... ¿Quién es ella?... ¿Por qué se encuentra aquí?

En pocas palabras, Nezhdánov le contó lo que sabía.

-Nezhdánov... dijo él por fin-. Tiene que tener mucho cuidado con esta chica. Porque... si... alguna cosa le pasara... la culpa seria suya. Adiós.

Salió. Nezhdánov se quedó largo rato de pie en el centro de la habitación, murmurando:

-¡Dios mío! ¡Es mejor no pensar!

Se echó de bruces en la cama.

Cuando Marianna volvió a su habitación, encontró en la mesa una pequeña nota con el siguiente contenido: «Usted me da lástima. Se está arruinando. Ha perdido la razón. ¿En qué abismos se está lanzando con los ojos cerrados? ¿Por quién y para quién? V.»

En la habitación había un olor fresco y particularmente delicado: evidentemente, Valentina Mijáilovna acababa de salir. Marianna cogió la pluma y escribió más abajo: «Que no le dé lástima. Dios sabe cuál de las dos necesita más piedad. Yo sólo sé que no quisiera estar en su lugar. M.ª Dejó la nota sobre la mesa. No dudaba de que su respuesta llegaría a manos de Valentina Mijáilovna.

A la mañana siguiente, después de verse una vez más con Nezhdánov y de haber

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declinado definitivamente el cargo de administrador en la fábrica de Sipiaguin, Solomin volvió a casa. Durante todo el camino estuvo meditando, cosa que en él pasaba raramente: el movimiento del carruaje normalmente le sumergía en una leve somnolencia. Pensó en Marianna y también en Nezhdánov; le pareció que si *él* estuviera enamorado, él, Solomin, tendría otro aire, hablaría y miraría de otro modo. «Pero», pensó, «eso nunca me sucedió, y por eso no sé cuál sería mi aire.» Recordó a una muchacha irlandesa que había visto una vez en una tienda, detrás del mostrador; recordó su maravilloso cabello casi negro, sus ojos azules y pestañas gruesas, y cómo ella le había observado, ansiosa y triste, y cómo él esperó después mucho tiempo delante del escaparate y cómo había estado agitado, vacilando si debía o no presentarse. Estaba entonces en Londres, donde había sido enviado con dinero para hacer algunas compras. Solomin por poco no se quedó en Londres, por poco no devolvió el dinero al dueño, tan fuerte había sido la impresión producida en él por la bella Polly... Sabía su nombre porque una de las otras dependientas la había llamado. De todas maneras, se dominó y volvió a su amo. Polly era más bella que Marianna, pero ésta tenía el mismo aire ansioso y triste... y era rusa...

-Pero ¿qué es esto? -se preguntó Solomin en voz baja-. ¿Me preocupo por las novias de los demás?

Y sacudió el cuello del abrigo como desearía sacudir todos los pensamientos superfluos. En ese momento entró en la fábrica y avistó a su fiel Pável en el umbral de su pequeño hogar.

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EL rechazo de Solomin ofendió a Sipiaguin. Hasta tal punto, que descubrió de repente que aquel Stevenson nativo no era al fin y al cabo un ingeniero tan notable como había pensado y que, aunque no fuera un auténtico fatuo, había estado dándose aires, como plebeyo que era. «Todos estos rusos, cuando se convencen de que saben algo, no hay quien los aguante. *Au* fond, Kaloméitsev tiene razón.» Bajo la influencia de sensaciones tan hostiles e irritables, el estadista *-en* herbe- se volvió aún más antipático y distante en sus encuentros con Nezhdánov. Dijo a Kolia que ese día no necesitaba clases, que tenía que acostumbrarse a ser independiente... De todos modos, no despidió al profesor, como éste esperaba: Siguió ignorándole. Pero

Comentario [Librodot-130]: En el fondo.

Comentario [Librodot-131]: Prometedor.

Valentina Mijáilovna no ignoró a Marianna. Una terrible escena tuvo lugar entre ambas.

Cerca de dos horas antes de la cena, se encontraron de repente solas en la sala de visitas. Ambas sintieron que había llegado el momento inevitable de la confrontación y, después de un instante de vacilación, se acercaron instintivamente. Valentina Mijáilovna sonreía levemente; Marianna apretaba los labios; ambas estaban pálidas. Cuando cruzaba la sala, Valentina Mijáilovna miró hacia la izquierda y hacia la derecha y arrancó la hoja de un geranio... Los ojos de Marianna estaban fijos directamente en la cara sonriente que se acercaba.

La señora Sipiaguin fue la primera que se detuvo y, tamborileando con la punta de los dedos en el respaldo de una silla, dijo en un tono casual:

-Marianna Vikéntievna, parece que empezamos a correspondernos... Viviendo bajo el mismo techo, se trata de algo muy extraño. Y sabe, no me gustan mucho las cosas extrañas.

-No fui yo quien empezó esa correspondencia, Valentina Mijáilovna.

-Sí... Tiene razón. Esta vez la culpable soy yo. Pero no encontré otro modo de hacerle despertar el sentido... como se lo diga... el sentido...

-Hable abiertamente, Valentina Mijáilovna, no dude, no tema ofenderme.

-El sentido... de las conveniencias.

Valentina Mijáilovna se calló; sólo se oía en la sala el leve tamborileo de sus dedos en

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la silla.

-Y ¿de qué manera cree que yo no seguí las reglas de las conveniencias? -preguntó Marianna.

Valentina Mijáilovna se encogió de hombros.

-*Ma chére, vous n'étes plus un enfant...* y sabe muy bien lo que quiero decir. ¿Se imagina que su conducta podría ser secreto para mí, para Anna Zajárovna, para toda la casa? Sin embargo, debo reconocer que no se preocupó mucho por esconderla. Hizo simplemente una bravata. Quizá sólo Borís Andreích no se dio cuenta de nada... Pero él está ocupado con otros asuntos más interesantes e importantes. Excepto él, todo el mundo conoce su comportamiento, ¡todo el mundo!

Comentario [Librodot-132]: Usted ya no es una niña, querida.

Marianna empalidecía cada vez más.

-Debo pedirle, Valentina Mijáilovna, que se exprese de una manera más concreta. ¿De qué está insatisfecha?

«L'insolente!», pensó la señora Sipiaguin. Pero se contuvo.

Comentario [Librodot-133]: ¡La insolente!

-¿Quiere saber de qué estoy insatisfecha, Marianna? Entonces le digo que me desagradan sus encuentros con un muchacho que le es muy inferior por nacimiento, educación y posición social. Me desagrada... ¡no! ¡La palabra no es suficientemente fuerte! Estoy disgustada por sus visitas... nocturnas a ese muchacho. ¿Y dónde ocurre esto? ¡Bajo mi propio techo! ¿O considera eso muy natural y que yo debería callarme y de ese modo proteger su frivolidad? Como una mujer honrada... *Oui, mademoiselle, je l'ai été, je le suis et je le serai toujours!...,* ¡no puedo dejar de sentirme indignada!

Comentario [Librodot-134]: Sí, señorita, lo fui, lo soy y lo seré siempre!

Valentina Mijáilovna se echó sobre un sillón, como dominada pesadamente por su indignación.

Marianna sonrió por primera vez.

-Yo no dudo de su honra pasada, presente y futura ¡ -empezó ella-, y le digo esto con verdadera sinceridad. Pero no tiene razón para sentirse indignada. Yo no traje ninguna vergüenza bajo su techo. El muchacho a quien se refirió... sí, yo, realmente... le amo...

-¿Ama *a Msié* Nezhdánov?

-Sí, le quiero.

Valentina Mijáilovna se enderezó en la silla.

-Pero recuerde, Marianna, que él es todavía un estudiante, sin nacimiento, sin familia y ¡más joven que usted! -estas últimas palabras fueron pronunciadas con cierto placer-. ¿Qué podrá salir de eso? ¿Y qué encuentra en él? Es sólo un muchacho de cabeza vacía.

-No siempre pensó eso de él, Valentina Mijáilovna.

-¡Oh, Dios mío! Mi querida, no me meta en esas cosas... *Pas tant d'ésprit que pa, je vous prie.* Se trata de su futuro. Piense bien qué partido es éste.

Comentario [Librodot-135]: ¡No vaya demasiado lejos, le pido!

-Le confieso, Valentina Mijáilovna, que nunca pensé en partidos.

¿Cómo? ¿Qué? ¿Qué debo pensar? Supongamos que sigue a su corazón... ¡eso tendrá que terminar en una boda!

-No lo sé... no pensé en eso.

-¿No pensó en eso? ¡Debe de estar loca!

Marianna se volvió un poco.

-Acabe con esta conversación, Valentina Mijáilovna. No nos llevará a ninguna parte. Nunca nos podremos entender.

Valentina Mijáilovna se levantó impetuosamente.

-¡No puedo y no debo terminar esta conversación! Es demasiado seria... Soy responsable de usted ante... -a Valentina Mijáilovna le hubiera gustado decir «...¡ante Dios!», pero vaciló y dijo-: ¡...ante todo el mundo! ¡No puedo quedar callada al escuchar esa locura! Y ¿por qué razón no puedo comprenderla? ¡Qué terriblemente orgullosos son todos estos jóvenes de hoy! Por lo contrario... la comprendo incluso muy bien, ¡comprendo que está infectada con esas nuevas ideas, que la llevarán a la ruina! Pero entonces ya será tarde.

-¡Quizá! Pero, créame, ¡aunque nos arruinemos, no extenderemos un solo dedo para que nos salve! Valentina Mijáilovna dio una palmada.

-Otra vez el orgullo, ¡ese terrible orgullo! Pero escuche, Marianna, escuche -exclamó cambiando súbitamente de tono. Quería acercarse a Marianna, pero ésta retrocedió-. *Écoutez-moi, je vous en conjure!* A fin de cuentas, yo no soy tan vieja ni tan estúpida como para que no sea posible comprendernos. *Je ne suis pas une encroutée.* Cuando era joven incluso me consideraban republicana... no menos que usted. Oiga: no voy a fingir que tuve algunos sentimientos maternales hacia usted y no está de acuerdo con su carácter quejarse de eso. Pero siempre supe, y lo sé hoy, que tengo ciertos deberes en relación a usted... y siempre quise cumplirlos. Quizá el partido que soñé para usted y por el cual tanto Borís Andreích como yo no vacilaríamos en hacer cualquier sacrificio... quizá ese partido no estuviera totalmente de acuerdo con sus ideas... pero en el fondo de mi corazón...

Marianna la miró, miró aquellos ojos maravillosos, aquellos labios levemente pintados, aquellas manos blancas, aquellos dedos ligeramente apartados, ornados de anillos, que la elegante dama tan enérgicamente apretaba contra el corpiño de su vestido de seda... y, de golpe, la interrumpió:

-¿Habló de un partido, Valentina Mijáilovna? ¿Llama "partido" a aquel su amigo vulgar e inhumano, el señor Kaloméitsev?

-Sí, Marianna Vikéntievna, hablo del señor Kaloméitsev... de ése joven culto y excelente, que sin duda hará feliz a su esposa y que ¡sólo una loca podría rechazar. ¡Una loca!

-¡Qué hacer, *ma* tante! Es una lástima, pero ¡soy una loca!

-¿Tienes alguna objeción seria contra él?

-Oh, absolutamente nada. Sólo le desprecio. Valentina Mijáilovna movió la cabeza con impaciencia y de nuevo se dejó caer en la silla.

-Dejemos eso. *Retournons á nos moutons*. Entonces, ¿amas al señor Nezhdánov?

-Sí.

-¿Y pretendes continuar... encontrándote con él? -Sí, lo pretendo.

-No... y si te lo prohibo.

-No la escucharé.

Valentina Mijáilovna saltó de la silla.

-Ah, ¿no me escuchará? Y esto me lo dice una muchacha que sólo conoció bondad por mi parte, que yo crié en mi casa, esto me lo dice... esto me lo dice...

-La hija de un padre deshonrado -dijo Marianna severamente-. Siga, ¡no hay necesidad de cumplidos!

-*Ce n'est pas moi qui vous le fait dire, mademoiselle*! Pero, de todos modos, ¡eso no es para enorgullecerse! Una chica que come de mi pan...

-¡No me eche en cara su pan, Valentina Mijáilovna! Le saldría más caro tener una aya francesa para Kolia... ¡Soy yo quien le da clases de francés!

Valentina Mijáilovna levantó la mano, cogiendo un pequeño pañuelo de cambray perfumado con un gran monograma bordado en una esquina y quiso decir algo. Pero Marianna siguió exaltada:

-Tendría razón, mil veces razón, si al lado de los pequeños beneficios y sacrificios, estuviese en posición de decir: «esa chica que yo quise...», pero ¡usted es demasiado honesta para decir algo así! -Marianna temblaba como si tuviera fiebre-. Siempre me odió. Ahora mismo, en lo íntimo de su corazón, al que acaba de referirse, está contenta... sí, contenta, porque yo justifico sus previsiones constantes, al cubrirme de escándalo y vergüenza... y sólo está molesta porque parte de esta vergüenza caerá en su *honrada,* aristocrática casa.

-Me insulta -murmuró Valentina Mijáilovna-, ¡haga el favor de dejar esta sala!

Pero Marianna ya no podía contenerse.

-Su casa, dijo, toda su casa, y Anna Zajárovna y todos, conocen mi conducta. Y todos están horrorizados e indignados... Pero yo ¿le pido alguna cosa, a usted o a toda esa gente? ¿Doy alguna importancia a su opinión? ¿Cree que su pan no me fue amargo? ¿Qué pobreza no es preferible a esta riqueza? Hay un gran abismo entre mí y su casa, un abismo que nunca, nunca podrá ser cruzado. Usted es una mujer inteligente, ¿no lo cree? Y si me odia, si comprende este sentimiento, ¿qué se cree que siento yo por usted? No vale la pena entrar en

Comentario [Librodot-136]: Escúcheme, le pido!

Comentario [Librodot-137]: No soy una reaccionaria.

Comentario [Librodot-138]: Tía.

Comentario [Librodot-139]: Volvamos a lo nuestro.

Comentario [Librodot-140]: ¡No soy yo quien la hace decir eso, señorita!

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detalles innecesarios, ya que es un sentimiento bastante claro.

-*Sortez, sortez, vous dis-je...* -repitió Valentina Mijáilovna golpeando el suelo con su bello y pequeño pie.

Comentario [Librodot-141]: Salga, salga, le digo...

Marianna dio algunos pasos hacia la puerta.

-Voy a librarla de mi presencia. Pero ¿sabe una cosa, Valentina Mijáilovna? Dicen que ni Raquel en el *Bajazet* de Racine consiguió decir bien ese: *Sortez*» *y* usted le es muy inferior. Y una cosa más: ¿No dijo hace poco... *Je suis une honnéte femme. je l'ai été et je le serai toujours?* Pues ¡yo estoy segura de que soy mucho más honesta que usted! ¡Adiós!

Comentario [Librodot-142]: ¡Salga!

Marianna salió rápidamente y Valentina Mijáilovna saltó de la silla. Quería gritar, llorar... Pero no sabía por qué tenía que gritar y las lágrimas no le venían.

Se limitó a abanicarse con el pañuelo, pero su olor fuerte le afectó aún más los nervios... Se sentía infeliz, ultrajada... Reconocía cierta verdad en lo que acababa de oír. Pero ¿cómo podía alguien ser tan injusto con ella? «Seré yo tan mala?», pensó. Y se miró en un espejo que había entre dos ventanas. El espejo reflejó un rostro encantador, un poco excitado, con un rubor que venía y desaparecía, pero a pesar de todo un rostro fascinante, unos ojos maravillosos, tiernos, aterciopelados... «¿Yo? mala?», pensó de nuevo. «¿Con estos ojos?»

Pero en este momento entró el marido, y ella de nuevo se cubrió el rostro con el pañuelo.

-¿Qué te ocurre? -preguntó él ansiosamente-. ¿Qué tienes, Valia? Se había inventado este diminutivo que, sin embargo, sólo usaba cuando estaban verdaderamente solos, *téte-á-téte,* particularmente en la provincia.

Primero no quería contestar, aseguró que no tenía nada... pero acabó por volverse en la silla, de una manera muy seductora, pasándole los brazos por los hombros (él estaba de pie, inclinado sobre ella), ocultándole el rostro en el chaleco... y le contó todo. Sin ninguna hipocresía o pensamiento interesado, intentó excusar a Marianna atribuyéndolo todo a su juventud, al temperamento arrebatado y a los defectos de su primera educación. Y también sin pensamientos reservados, intentó excusarse. «¡Con una hija mía esto no habría pasado! ¡La habría vigilado de otra manera!» Sipiaguin la escuchó hasta el final con indulgencia, con compasión, pero severamente. Continuó en la misma posición mientras ella no le quitó los brazos de los hombros y no movió la cabeza; la llamó ángel, la besó en la frente, declaró que ahora sabía el camino que tenía que seguir como jefe de la casa, y salió, como sale un hombre enérgico, consciente de tener que cumplir un deber desagradable pero indispensable...

A las ocho, después de la cena, sentado en su habitación, Nezhdánov escribía a su amigo Silin.

«Amigo Vladimir, te escribo en un momento decisivo de mi existencia. Fui despedido de esta casa y me marcho. Pero eso aún no es nada... No me voy sólo. Me acompaña aquella muchacha de quien te escribí. Todo nos une: la similitud de nuestro destino, la soledad, las convicciones, las aspiraciones y, por último, el sentimiento mutuo. Nos queremos pero, de cualquier manera, estoy convencido de que no podría experimentar el sentimiento del amor de otra forma diferente de la que me surge ahora. Mentiría, sin embargo, si te dijera que no siento terribles dudas en el corazón y un recelo misterioso... Todo ante nuestro es oscuridad. No necesito explicarte lo que vamos a hacer y lo que realmente hemos escogido. Yo y Marianna no vamos tras la felicidad, no queremos diversiones. Vamos a entrar en la lucha juntos, uno al lado del otro, apoyándonos mutuamente. Nuestro objetivo está claro para nosotros; pero no sabemos qué caminos se dirigen allí. ¿Encontraremos si no simpatía y ayuda, por lo menos la posibilidad de trabajo? Marianna es una magnífica y honrada muchacha. Si nuestro destino es perecer, yo no quiero censurarme por haberla arrastrado, porque ya no es posible otra vida para ella. ¡Vladimir, Vladimir! Me siento tan desdichado... La duda me agita... no en relación a mis sentimientos hacia ella, sin duda, sino... ¡no lo sé! Y ahora es demasiado tarde para volver atrás. Tiéndenos tus manos desde lejos y deséanos paciencia, fuerza de abnegación y amor. Y tú, pueblo ruso, desconocido por nosotros, pero amado con todo nuestro corazón, no nos recibas con demasiada indiferencia... enséñanos lo

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que debemos esperar de ti.

Adiós, Vladimir, adiós!»

Habiendo escrito estas pocas líneas, Nezhdánov se dirigió hacia el pueblo. A la madrugada siguiente, antes del alba, estaba cerca del bosque de abedules, no lejos del jardín de Sipiaguin. Un poco más adelante, detrás de los grandes ramos verdes trenzados de un grupo de nogales, había quedado un pesado carro campesino enganchado a un par de caballos sin riendas. Dentro, bajo el asiento de cuerda, dormía, tumbado en un haz de heno y con la cabeza tapada por una vieja chaqueta zurcida, un pequeño mujik viejo y entrecano. Nezhdánov miraba persistentemente la carretera, los pequeños sauces al fondo del jardín: la noche calma y gris aún dominaba, las minúsculas estrellas centelleaban lejos, perdidas en la vasta expansión del cielo. Hacia oriente, las nubes redondeadas tenían ya un leve tinte del alba. De golpe, Nezhdánov se estremeció y se puso alerta: allí cerca, primero se oyó un estallido, después el ruido del portón. Una pequeña figura femenina, envuelta en un chal, con un paquete de ropa en la mano sin guantes, apareció vagamente desde las sombras hondas de los sauces hacia la carretera polvorienta y, cruzándola oblicuamente, como de puntillas, se dirigió hacia el bosque. Nezhdánov corrió hacia ella.

-¿Marianna? -murmuró.

-¡Soy yo! -se oyó una respuesta suave desde el chal.

-Por aquí, ven -respondió Nezhdánov cogiéndola torpemente por el brazo desnudo que traía el paquete de ropa.

Ella temblaba como si tuviera fiebre. La condujo hacia el carro y despertó al pequeño mujik. Éste saltó inmediatamente, se puso en su asiento, metió los brazos en las mangas de la chaqueta, cogió la cuerda que hacía la función de riendas... Los caballos empezaron a caminar. El los animó cautelosamente con una voz aún ronca del sueño pesado. Nezhdánov colocó a Marianna en el asiento del carro, extendiendo antes su capa, le envolvió los pies en una manta para evitar la humedad del heno, se sentó a su lado y, dirigiéndose al mujik, dijo en voz baja:

-Vamos a donde sabes.

El pequeño mujik tiró de las riendas, los caballos salieron de la mata resoplando con fuerza y temblando y, arrastrando las pequeñas medas, hicieron rodar el carro por la carretera. Nezhdánov pasó un brazo por la cintura de Marianna. Ella levantó el chal con sus dedos fríos y, volviendo el rostro hacia él y sonriendo, murmuró:

-¡Qué bueno es el aire fresco de la mañana, Aliósha!

-Sí -respondió el mujik-, ¡habrá mucho rocío!

El rocío era ya tan fuerte que los ejes de las medas del carro, cogiendo la hierba alta al borde de la carretera, esparcían un auténtico aguacero de pequeñas gotas y la hierba verde parecía plateada.

Marianna se estremeció de nuevo con el frío.

-Hace fresco, hace frío -repitió ella alegremente-. Pero soy libre, Aliosha, ¡soy libre!

XXVII

SOLOMIN corrió al portón de la fábrica en cuanto le dijeron que un caballero con una señora habían llegado en un carro y le buscaban. Sin saludarles, inclinando sólo la cabeza varias veces, dijo al campesino que entrara en el patio y se detuviera delante de la casa. Después ayudó a Marianna a bajar. Nezhdánov saltó inmediatamente después. Solomin les condujo por un pasillo largo y oscuro, por una escalera estrecha y arqueada en la parte de atrás de la casa, hasta el segundo piso. Allá, abrió una puerta por la que entraron en una pequeña habitación bastante arreglada, con dos ventanas.

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-¡Bienvenidos! -exclamó Solomin con su sonrisa de siempre, que esta vez parecía aún más ancha y luminosa de lo habitual-. Este és vuestro alojamiento. *Éste...* y el otro de al lado. Muy sencillo, pero se puede vivir. Y nadie os espiará. Aquí, bajo las ventanas, hay lo que mi amo llama el jardín y que para mí es el patio de la cocina. Llega hasta casi la pared y hay una cerca a la derecha y otra a la izquierda. Un lugar tranquilo. Bien, ¿cómo está, querida bárishnia? Y usted, Nezhdánov, ¿cómo está?

Les apretó las manos. Ellos estaban inmóviles, sin quitarse las chaquetas, y con una emoción silenciosa, medio asustada, medio alegre, y mirando hacia adelante.

-¿Entonces? -empezó Solomin- ¿No se ponen cómodos? ¿Tienen mucho equipaje?

Marianna mostró su paquete, que aún tenía en la mano.

-Yo tengo sólo esto.

-Yo tengo una cartera y un saco de viaje, que quedaron en el carro. Voy por ellos...

-No se moleste, no se moleste -Solomin abrió la puerta-. ¡Pável! -gritó hacia la escalera oscura-. Corre, hermano... y trae las cosas que están en el carro.

-¡En seguida! -se oyó la voz del omnipresente Pável.

Solomin se volvió hacia Marianna, que se había quitado el chal y desabrochaba la capa.

-¿Y fue todo bien? -preguntó.

-Sí... nadie nos vio. Yo dejé una carta para la señora Sipiaguin. Pero, Vasili Fedótych, yo no he traído ningún vestido, ni ropa blanca, porque supongo que nos enviará... -por una razón cualquiera, Marianna no se decidía a decir: hacia el pueblo-. Pero da igual: no me harán ninguna falta. Y aún tengo dinero para comprar lo que sea necesario.

-Trataremos de eso más tarde... pero ahora -dijo Solomin señalando a Pável, que llegaba con las cosas de Nezhdánov-, les recomiendo a mi mejor amigo aquí: pueden contar totalmente con él... como si se tratara de mi mismo. ¿Hablaste a Tatiana del samovar? -añadió en voz baja.

-Casi está -respondió Pável-. Incluida la crema.

-Tatiana es su mujer -continuó Solomin-, y de tanta confianza como el marido. Mientras... bien, mientras no se acostumbre, bárishnia... ella la cuidará.

Marianna dejó la capa encima de un sofá forrado de cuero, que estaba en un rincón.

-Llámame Marianna, Vasili Fedótych. ¡No quiero ser bárishnia! Y tampoco necesito criadas... No he dejado aquella casa para tener criadas. No mire mi vestido... *allá* no tenía otro tipo de indumentaria. Ahora tengo que cambiar todo esto.

El vestido, de tejido fino, marrón, era muy simple pero a la moda, y había sido confeccionado por un sastre de San Petersburgo y le sentaba a la perfección tanto en la cintura como en los hombros.

-Bien, no una criada, sino una ayudante, a la americana. Sea como sea, seguro que le vendrá bien un poco de té. Aún es temprano y deben estar cansados. Ahora tengo que ir a la fábrica, pero nos veremos más tarde. Si necesitan algo, pídanlo a Pável o a Tatiana.

Marianna le alargó apresuradamente las dos manos. -¿Cómo se lo podremos agradecer, Vasili Fedótych? Le miró emocionada.

Solomin le apretó una mano suavemente.

-Yo le diría que no hay por qué estar agradecida... pero estaría mintiendo. Es mejor decirle que sus agradecimientos me producen el mayor placer. Así, estamos pagados. ¡Adiós! ¡Vamos, Pável!

Marianna y Nezhdánov se quedaron solos.

Ella corrió hacia él y, mirándole con la misma expresión con que había mirado a Solomin, pero aún más feliz, aún más emotiva y satisfecha.

-¡Oh, amigo mío! -exclamó-. Estamos empezando una nueva vida... ¡Finalmente! ¡No puedes imaginar cómo esta pobre habitación, donde pasaremos sólo algunos días, me parece amorosa y querida comparada con aquellos odiosos palacios! Dime, ¿estás contento?

Nezhdánov le cogió las manos y las apretó contra su pecho.

-Soy feliz, Marianna, por empezar esta nueva vida contigo. Serás mi estrella polar, mi apoyo, mi coraje...

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-¡Querido Aliosha! Pero ahora tenemos que lavarnos un poco y arreglarnos. Yo voy a mi habitación... y tú quédate aquí. Tardo sólo un minuto...

Marianna entró en la otra habitación, cerró y, un minuto después, entreabriendo la puerta, sacó la cabeza hacia fuera y dijo:

-¡Solomin es encantador! -después cerró de nuevo y se oyó girar la llave.

Nezhdánov fue hasta la ventana, miró hacia el jardín... Un viejo, viejísimo manzano le atrajo particularmente la atención. Se sacudió, se tendió, buscó en el saco... pero no sacó nada de él: quedó pensativo...

Un cuarto de hora después, Marianna regresó con el rostro lavado y brillante, muy alegre y viva, y pocos momentos después entró la mujer de Pável, Tatiana, con el samovar, el servicio de té, pan, crema.

En completo contraste con el aire agitanado del marido, Tatiana era una auténtica rusa, corpulenta, sin sombrero, con largas trenzas torcidas alrededor de un peine de cuerno, con un rostro rudo pero simpático y unos ojos grises, bondadosos. Llevaba un vestido agradable, si bien con el estampado ya descolorido. Tenía las manos claras y bellas, aunque grandes. Hizo una reverencia tranquilamente, los saludó con un acento firme, claro, sin ninguna melodía: «Dios les salve», y empezó a preparar el samovar y las otras cosas para el té.

Marianna se acercó a ella.

-Déjeme ayudarla, Tatiana. Déme aunque sólo sea una servilleta.

-No tiene importancia, bárishnia, estamos acostumbradas. Vasili Fedótych me dijo que hiciera esto. Si desean algo, basta con que lo digan y estaremos encantadas.

-Tatiana, no me llame bárishnia, por favor... Voy vestida como una bárishnia, pero... soy...

La mirada penetrante de Tatiana desconcertó a Marianna, que se calló.

-¿Y qué es entonces? -preguntó Tatiana con su voz firme.

-Si quiere saber... bien, claro que soy una señora por nacimiento, pero quiero liberarme de todo eso... y ser como todas... como todas las mujeres simples.

-¡Ah, entonces es eso! Ahora ya lo sé. Quiere volverse simplificada. Ahora hay mucha gente así.

-¿Cómo dijo, Tatiana? ¿Simplificada?

-Sí... es una palabra que apareció entre nosotros. Ser simplificado significa ser como el pueblo simple. Es una buena cosa enseñar al pueblo, pero es muy difícil. Sí, ¡di-fí-cil! ¡Le deseo suerte!

-¡Simplificada! -repitió Marianna-. ¿Oyes, Aliosha? Ahora estamos simplificados.

Nezhdánov sonrió y repitió también:

-¡Simplificados! ¡Simplificados!

-¿Y es su marido o su hermano? -preguntó Tatiana lavando cuidadosamente los vasos con sus grandes manos habilidosas, mirando a Nezhdánov y Marianna con una sonrisa bondadosa.

-No -respondió Marianna-, ni es mi marido ni mi hermano.

Tatiana levantó la cabeza.

-¿Entonces viven juntos libremente? Eso también pasa ahora a menudo. Antes se daba sobre todo entre inconformistas, pero actualmente incluso entre otra gente. Siempre que haya la bendición de Dios... se puede vivir en paz sin necesidad de los curas. Tenemos algunos así aquí en la fábrica. Y no son de los peores.

-¡Qué bellas palabras utiliza, Tatiana!... "Viven juntos libremente..." Me gusta mucho. Y ahora, Tatiana, quiero pedirle una cosa. Tengo que hacerme o comprar un vestido como el suyo o aún más simple. Y zapatos, y medias, y un pañuelo... todo como usted. Tengo dinero suficiente.

-No hay nada más fácil, bárishnia... Bien, por favor, no se enfade. No le llamaré bárishnia. Pero ¿cómo la debo tratar?

-Por Marianna.

-¿Y cómo se llama su padre?

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-¿Y para qué quiere saber el nombre de mi padre? Dígame simplemente Marianna. Igual que yo le digo Tatiana.

-Esto no me gusta mucho. Es mejor que me lo diga.

-De acuerdo. Mi padre se llamaba Vikent. ¿Y el suyo? -El mío... Ósip.

-Entonces voy a llamarla Tatiana Ósipovna.

-Y yo Marianna Vikéntievna. Así estará bien.

-¿No quiere tomar un poco de té, Tatiana Ósipovna?

-Por esta vez pase, Marianna Vikéntievna, aunque

Egórych me regañe después.

-¿Quién es Egórych?

-Pável, mi marido.

-Siéntese, Tatiana Ósipovna.

-Está bien, Marianna Vikéntievna.

Tatiana se sentó y empezó a tomar té chupando pequeños terrones de azúcar, girándolos continuamente con los dedos y entortando los ojos hacia el lado que había mordido. Marianna empezó a conversar con ella. Tatiana respondía con mucha habilidad y hacía también preguntas y contaba cosas. Adoraba simplemente a Solomin e incluso el marido venía después de Vasili Fedótych. Pero no se interesaba por la vida de la fábrica.

Comentario [Librodot-143]: En Rusia el té se tomaba sin azúcar, metiéndose en la boca un terrón de azúcar, que se disolvía al beber. Se trataba de un azúcar muy duro, que aún hoy se utiliza. Algunas veces, en las capas más pobres, después de beber su té, una persona pasaba su terrón a otra.

-No es ciudad ni es campo... Si no fuera por Vasili Fedótych no me quedaría aquí ni una hora.

Marianna la escuchaba con mucha atención. Sentado un poco aparte, Nezhdánov la observaba y se admiraba por su interés: para Marianna todo aquello era nuevo, pero a él le parecía que ya había visto centenares de mujeres como Tatiana y que había hablado con ellas centenares de veces.

-Sabe, Tatiana Ósipovna -dijo finalmente Marianna-, usted piensa que nosotros queremos enseñar al pueblo, pero nosotros queremos servirlo.

¿Servirlo? Enséñelo, que es lo mejor que puede hacer. Míreme a mí, por ejemplo. Cuando me casé con Egórych no sabía leer ni escribir, pero ahora, gracias a Vasili Fedótych, ya sé. No fue él quien me enseñó, claro, pero pagó a un viejo para que me enseñara. Y yo todavía soy joven, aunque ya tenga un aspecto maduro.

Marianna quedó callada.

-Yo, Tatiana Ósipovna -empezó de nuevo-, querría aprender un oficio cualquiera... Hablaremos de eso más tarde. Coso mal, pero si aprendiera a cocinar... podría ser cocinera.

Tatiana quedó pensativa.

-Y ¿por qué cocinera? Sólo los ricos y los comerciantes tienen cocineras. Los pobres cocinan ellos mismos. Y en una cantina para obreros... ¡ni pensarlo!

-Pero yo podría vivir en una casa rica y hacer amistad con los pobres. ¿Cómo podré conocerlos si no es así? No siempre tendré la oportunidad que tengo con usted.

Tatiana giró la taza vacía en el platillo.

-Eso es difícil dijo, por fin, con un suspiro-, y no está tan a nuestro alcance resolverlo. Le digo lo que sé, pero no soy muy inteligente. Debe hablar con Egórych. El, sí, lo es. Lee muchos libros y puede decirle todo de pe a pa -aquí miró a Marianna, que enrollaba un cigarillo-. Y una cosa aún, Marianna Vikéntievna: perdóneme, pero si quiere simplificarse... tiene que dejarse de eso -señaló el cigarillo-. Si quiere ser cocinera, eso no sirve: todos sabrían en seguida que es una bárishnia. Sí.

Marianna echó el cigarillo por la ventana.

-Dejo de fumar... es fácil. Si las mujeres del pueblo no fuman, yo dejo de fumar.

-Es cierto, Marianna Vikéntievna. Nuestros hombres, sí, fuman, pero las mujeres no. ¡Es así! Y mire, aquí viene Vasili Fedótych. Son sus pasos. Puede preguntarle. El puede decirle la mejor manera de hacer las cosas.

En seguida se oyó en la puerta la voz de Solomin: ¿Se puede?

-¡Entre, entre! -gritó Marianna.

-Una costumbre inglesa que me quedó -dijo Solomin al entrar-. Entonces, ¿cómo se

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siente? ¿No está triste? Veo que toman té con Tatiana. Deben escucharla, que es una persona sensata... mi amo viene hoy... ¡muy poco oportuno! Y se quedará para la cena. ¡Qué remedio! Es el dueño.

-¿Qué tipo de hombre es él? -preguntó Nezhdánov, saliendo de su rincón.

-No es malo... Conoce su oficio. Es de la nueva generación. Muy delicado... y lleva puños de encaje, pero a sus ojos nada se escapa, como a los de la vieja generación. Sería capaz de arrancar la piel a alguien, diciendo al mismo tiempo: "¡Vuélvase un poco de lado, por favor... aquí hay aún un trozo de piel pegado... hay que limpiarlo!" Conmigo es muy amable, porque me necesita. Yo he venido sólo a decirles que hoy quizá no pueda verles de nuevo. Les traerán aquí la cena. Y no vayan al patio. ¿Qué le parece, Marianna? ¿Sipiaguin la buscará? ¿Ordenará que la busquen?

-Creo que no -respondió Marianna.

-Y yo estoy seguro de que sí -dijo Nezhdánov.

-Bien, es igual -continuó Solomin-, hay que tener cuidado durante los primeros días. Después, llegará la calma.

-Sólo una cosa -observó Nezhdánov-. Markélov tiene que saber de mi paradero. Deberá ser informado. ¿Por qué?

-Tiene que serlo, por nuestra causa. Él tiene que saber siempre donde me encuentro. He dado mi palabra. Además él es de confianza.

-De acuerdo. Enviaremos a Pável.

-Y mis ropas, ¿estarán listas? -preguntó Nezhdánov.

-¿El traje? Claro... claro. Esta mascarada no sale muy cara. Adiós, descansen. Vamos, Tatiana.

Marianna y Nezhdánov quedaron otra vez solos.

XXVIII

PRIMERO se apretaron de nuevo mutuamente las manos; después Marianna exclamó:

-Espera, voy a ayudarte a arreglar tu habitación -y empezó a deshacerle la cartera y el saco de viaje.

Nezhdánov quiso ayudarla, pero ella explicó que quería hacerlo todo sola: «porque tengo que acostumbrarme al trabajo». Y realmente, ella misma puso la ropa en los clavos que encontró en el armario y los que clavó con el lomo de un cepillo a falta de un martillo. Ordenó después la ropa blanca en una cómoda vieja que se encontraba entre las dos ventanas.

-¿Qué es esto? -preguntó de repente-. ¿Un revólver? ¿Está cargado? ¿Para qué quieres tú esto?

-No está cargado... pero es mejor que me lo des. ¿Preguntas para qué quiero un revólver? En nuestra causa, conviene estar armado.

Ella rió y continuó su trabajo, sacudiendo cada una de las piezas de ropa y golpeándolas con la mano; incluso metió dos pares de botas bajo el sofá; los pocos libros, un mazo de papeles y un pequeño cuaderno con versos, los colocó, triunfalmente, en una mesa triangular que llamó bufete, y a la otra, la redonda, la llamó mesa de comer. Después, cogiendo el cuaderno de versos con las dos manos, lo irguió hasta su rostro, miró a Nezhdánov por encima de él, y dijo, con una sonrisa:

-Leeremos todo esto juntos, cuando tengamos algún tiempo libre. ¿Eh?

-¡Dame ese cuaderno! ¡Voy a quemarlo! -exclamó Nezhdánov-. ¡Es para lo que sirve!

-Si es así, ¿por qué lo trajiste? No, no dejaré que lo quemes. Realmente dicen que los escritores siempre amenazan con quemar sus cosas pero nunca lo hacen. De todos modos, ¡será mejor que yo lo guarde!

Nezhdánov quería protestar, pero Marianna corrió hacia la habitación de al lado con el cuaderno... y volvió sin él.

Se sentó junto a Nezhdánov, pero se levantó en seguida.

-Aún no estuviste... en mi habitación. ¿Quieres verla? No es peor que la tuya. Ven, voy a mostrártela.

Nezhdánov se levantó también y la siguió. La habitación *de ella* era ligeramente más pequeña que su habitación, pero los muebles eran un poco más bonitos y nuevos. Junto a la ventana estaba una maceta de cristal con flores y, en un rincón, una cama de hierro.

-Mira qué amable es Solomin -exclamó Mananna-. Pero no precisamos de tanto lujo: no vamos a tener a menudo una habitación como esta. ¿Sabes lo que he estado pensando? Que sería magnífico si encontráramos un lugar cualquiera para estar los dos y así no tendríamos que separarnos. Será difícil -añadió ella, haciendo una ligera pausa-, pero tenemos que pensar en ello. Pero, sea como fuere, ¿volverás a San Petersburgo?

¿Qué puedo yo hacer en San Petersburgo? ¿Ir a la Universidad? ¿Dar lecciones? Eso no lleva a ninguna parte.

A ver lo que dice Solomin exclamó Marianna-. El decidirá mejor lo que debemos hacer.

Volvieron a la otra habitación y de nuevo se sentaron uno junto al otro. Elogiaron a Solomin, a Tatiana, a Pável, hablaron de los Sipiaguin, de cómo su vida anterior había quedado de golpe tan lejos, como envuelta en niebla; después de nuevo se apretaron las manos, cambiaron miradas de felicidad; en seguida hablaron de la clase en la cual iban a intentar penetrar y cómo habrían de comportarse para que no sospecharan de ellos.

Nezhdánov garantizó que cuanto menos pensaran en eso, cuanto más naturalmente se comportaran, mejor.

-¡Claro! -exclamó Marianna-. Nosotros queremos simplificarnos, como dice Tatiana.

-Yo no pensaba en eso -empezó Nezhdánov-. Quería decir que no debemos constreñirnos...

Marianna, de repente, prorrumpió en risas. -Recordé ahora, Aliosha, que yo dije que habíamos quedado simplificados.

Nezhdánov rió también y repitió:

-Simplificados... -y después quedó pensativo. Y Marianna también.

-¡Aliosha! -exclamó ella.

-¿Qué hay?

-Parece que estamos ambos un poco incómodos. Los recién... *des nouveaux* mariés -explicó ella-, en el primer día de su viaje de bodas deben sentirse así. Son felices... están muy bien... pero siempre un poco incómodos.

Comentario [Librodot-144]: Los recién casados.

Nezhdánov dejó escapar una sonrisa forzada.

-Tú sabes muy bien, Marianna, que nosotros no somos recién... eso.

Marianna se levantó de su lugar y quedó en pie delante de Nezhdánov.

-Aliosha, sabes bien que cuando me lo digas, como un hombre honrado... y yo te creeré porque tú eres precisamente un hombre honrado... cuando me digas que me amas con aquel amor... bien, aquel amor que da derecho a la vida de la otra persona... cuando me digas eso... seré tuya.

Nezhdánov se sonrojó y se volvió un poco.

-Cuando yo te diga eso...

-¡Sí! ¿No ves que ahora no me lo dices...? Oh, sí, Aliosha, tú eres un verdadero hombre honrado. Bien, hablemos de cosas más serias.

-¡Pero yo te amo, Marianna!

-No lo dudo... y esperaré. Pero espera, aún no acabamos de arreglar tu bufete. Aquí hay algo envuelto, algo duro.

Nezhdánov saltó de la silla.

-Espera, Marianna... eso... por favor, no lo toques.

Marianna se volvió hacia él por encima del hombro y levantó, sorprendida, las cejas.

-¿Un misterio? ¿Un secreto? ¿Tienes un secreto?

-Sí... sí -murmuró Nezhdánov. Y añadió a guisa de explicación-: Eso' es... un retrato.

Aquella palabra se le escapó involuntariamente. En el paquete que Marianna tenía en las

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manos estaba realmente su propio retrato, el que Markélov había dado a Nezhdánov.

¿Un retrato? -dijo ella, arrastrando la voz-. ¿De una mujer?

Ella le dio el paquete, pero él lo recibió tan torpemente que se le deslizó en la mano y se abrió.

-¡Ah... pero es mi retrato! -exclamó Marianna vivamente-. Bien, supongo que puedo ver mi retrato. Y se lo quitó.

-¿Lo hiciste tú?

-No... no lo hice yo.

-Entonces, ¿quién? ¿Markélov?

-Acertaste. Fue él...

¿Y cómo vino a parar a ti?

-Me lo regaló.

¿Cuándo?

Nezhdánov le contó cuándo y cómo. Mientras hablaba, Marianna miraba de él hacia el retrato, y por el pensamiento de ambos pasó la misma idea: «Si él estuviera aquí, *él* tendría el derecho de exigir...» Pero ni Marianna ni Nezhdánov expresaron en alto aquel pensamiento... quizá ambos tuvieran conciencia de que estaban pensando lo mismo.

Marianna envolvió de nuevo silenciosamente el retrato y lo dejó sobre la mesa.

-Es un buen hombre -murmuró ella-. ¿Dónde estará?

-En su casa, seguro. Mañana o pasado mañana tengo que ir allá a recoger unos libros y panfletos. Quería dármelos, pero evidentemente los olvidé al marchar.

Y tú, Aliosha, ¿crees que, cuando te dio este retrato, él desistió de todo... definitivamente de todo? -Creo que sí.

-¿Esperas encontrarle en casa?

-Claro.

-¡Ah! -Marianna bajó los ojos y dejó caer las manos-. Aquí está Tatiana con nuestra cena -exclamó, de repente-. Muy amable.

Tatiana apareció con los cubiertos, las servilletas, los platos. Mientras ponía la mesa, explicaba cosas de la fábrica.

-El dueño llegó de Moscú en el tren... y empezó a correr por todos los pisos como un loco. Claro que no entiende nada de nada, pero lo hace para que se vea, para dar ejemplo. Y Vasili Fedótych le trata como si fuera un niño. El dueño quería contrariarlo en algo, pero Vasili Fedótych le hizo callar. «Dejo todo esto inmediatamente», dijo él. Y el amo empezó en seguida a hablar bajo. Ahora están almorzando juntos. El dueño trajo un compañero... Ese sólo sabe admirar todo lo que ve. Pero debe tener dinero porque está casi siempre callado y sólo sabe mover la cabeza. Y es gordo, ¡gordísimo! ¡Un ricachón moscovita! Razón tiene el refrán que dice que Moscú está a los pies de toda Rusia y que todo se escurre hacia allá.

-¡Cómo lo observa todo! -exclamó Marianna.

-Ah, sí -observó Tatiana-. Aquí está la cena. Que les aproveche. Y yo me siento aquí un rato para verles.

Marianna y Nezhdánov empezaron a comer. Tatiana se sentó cerca de la ventana y reposó la cara en la mano.

-Les miro -dijo Tatiana-, y veo lo jóvenes y delicados que son... ¡Es tan agradable verles que hasta nos hace sufrir! ¡Ah, queridos! Han tomado sobre sí una tarea demasiado pesada! ¡Son personas como ustedes las que la gente del zar está ansiosa por meter en la cárcel!

-Nada de eso, ¡no nos asuste! -observó Nezhdánov-. ¿Conoce el proverbio: «Si llamas al mal, viene a tu encuentro»?

-Lo conozco, sí. Pero el mal está en todas partes y no es necesario llamarlo.

-¿Tiene hijos? -preguntó Marianna para salir por la tangente.

-Sí, un muchacho. Ya empezó a ir a la escuela. Tenía también una hija, pero se fue, el pajarito. Le ocurrió una desgracia: cayó bajo una rueda. Y ¡si por lo menos hubiera muerto en seguida! Pero no... sufrió mucho. Desde entonces, me volví más compasiva. Antes era dura

Librodot

como un árbol.

-Pero ¿no amaba a Pável Egórych?

-Oh, eso es diferente, son cosas de chicas. Y usted... ¿no le quiere?

-Sí.

-¿Mucho?

-Mucho.

¿Sí?

Tatiana miró a Nezhdánov, a Marianna, y no dijo nada más.

Marianna de nuevo cambió de conversación. Explicó a Tatiana que había dejado de fumar; Tatiana la elogió. Después Marianna le habló de nuevo del vestido; le recordó que había prometido enseñarle a cocinar...

-Y otra cosa: ¿no puede conseguirme un poco de lana gruesa, de color marrón? Quiero hacer calceta con un poco de lana gruesa. Quiero hacerme unas medias... simples.

Tatiana respondió que todo se arreglaría y, quitando la mesa, salió de la habitación con su caminar firme y tranquilo.

-Y nosotros, ¿qué haremos? -dijo Marianna, volviéndose hacia Nezhdánov. Y sin dar tiempo a que éste respondiera-: Si quieres, ya que mañana empezaremos en serio, podríamos dedicar esta tarde a la literatura. ¿Quieres que leamos tus versos? ¡Seré un crítico severo!

Nezhdánov tardó mucho tiempo en aceptar... pero finalmente lo hizo, y empezó a leer el cuaderno. Marianna estaba sentada a su lado y miraba su rostro mientras él leía. La muchacha había dicho la verdad: era un crítico severo. Pocos poemas le agradaron: prefería los líricos puros que, como ella decía, no eran didácticos. Nezhdánov no leía bien: no se decidía a declamar... pero tampoco quería emplear un tono demasiado seco. Como resultado, no salía ni plata ni calderilla. Marianna le interrumpió de repente para preguntar si conocía el admirable poema de Dobroliúbov, que empezaba: «La muerte para mí no tiene terror» [y] se lo recitó no muy bien, en un tono algo infantil.

Nezhdánov observó que era un poema demasiado triste y amargo. Y después añadió que él no podría escribir un poema como aquél porque ya sabía que no habría lágrimas sobre su tumba.

-Las habrá, si yo te sobrevivo -observó Marianna lentamente. Y levantando los ojos hacia el techo, preguntó, en un murmullo, como hablando para si misma:

-¿Cómo hizo él aquel retrato? ¿De memoria?

Nezhdánov se volvió hacia ella rápidamente.

-Sí, de memoria.

Marianna se sorprendió cuando oyó su respuesta. Tenía la sensación de que se había hecho aquella pregunta a sí mismo.

-Es sorprendente... -continuó en el mismo tono de voz-. Sin embargo, él no es hábil dibujando. Lo que yo quería decir... -añadió en voz baja-. Sí, sobre el poema de Dobroliúbov. Es necesario escribir versos como Pushkin... o como Dobroliúbov: no son auténtica poesía... pero no son peores que poesía.

-Y versos como los míos -preguntó Nezhdánov-, no debían escribirse de ninguna manera, ¿verdad?

-Versos como los tuyos agradan a los amigos, no por que sean muy buenos sino porque *tú* eres un hombre bueno... y ellos se parecen a tí.

Nezhdánov sonrió.

-Los has enterrado... y a mí con ellos.

Marianna le pegó suavemente en la mano y le riñó cariñosamente... Y en seguida anunció que estaba cansada y que se iba a dormir.

-A propósito -añadió, sacudiendo sus tirabuzones pequeños pero gruesos-, ¿sabes que tengo ciento treinta rublos? ¿Y tú?

-Noventa y ocho.

-Oh, entonces somos ricos... para personas simplificadas. Bien... ¡hasta mañana!

Salió, pero algunos momentos después la puerta se entreabrió y se oyó primero

Librodot

«Adiós!», y después, más bajo, «¡Adiós!». Y la llave giró en la cerradura.

Nezhdánov se hundió en el sofá y se tapó los ojos con las manos. Después se levantó muy deprisa, fue hasta la puerta y llamó.

-¿Qué hay? -se oyó.

-No *hasta* mañana, Marianna... ¡hasta mañana!

-¡Hasta mañana! -respondió la voz suave de la joven.

XXIX

A la mañana siguiente, Nezhdánov llamó de nuevo a la puerta de Marianna.

-Soy yo -respondió él a la pregunta «¿Quién es?»-: ¿Puedes salir?

-Un momento.

Ella salió y soltó una exclamación. En un primer momento, no le reconoció. Llevaba un caftán de nanquín usado, amarillo con pequeños botones y una cintura alta; llevaba el pelo peinado a la rusa -con raya en medio; alrededor del cuello un pañuelo azul; en la mano una gorra con visera partida; en los pies unas botas de cuero sucias.

-¡Dios mío! -exclamó Marianna-. ¡Qué feo estás! -y le abrazó muy deprisa y aún más deprisa le besó-. Pero ¿por qué te vestiste así? Pareces una especie de tendero... o quincallero... o criado jubilado. ¿Para qué es ese caftán? ¿Por qué no vistes una poddiókva o un armiak campesino?

Comentario [Librodot-145]: Chaqueta masculina con un pecho muy ancho.

Comentario [Librodot-146]: Chaqueta usada por los campesinos rusos del siglo XIX.

-¿Por qué? -empezó Nezhdánov, que parecía realmente una especie de negociante de ganado y él mismo se sentía incómodo y verdaderamente molesto y confuso y, sin saber qué hacer con las manos, se pegaba con los dedos abiertos en el pecho, como si se cepillara-. Pável asegura que con traje de campesino me reconocerían inmediatamente, y dice que con este traje es como... como si nunca hubiese llevado otro. Lo que no es muy lisonjeador para mi amor propio, digo entre paréntesis.

-¿Quieres empezar... en seguida? -preguntó Marianna.

-Sí, voy a intentarlo, aunque... realmente...

Tienes suerte -le interrumpió Marianna.

-Este Pável es un tipo formidable -continuó Nezhdánov-. Lo sabe todo, como si viera lo que pasa dentro de ti, y de repente pone una cara como si no fuera nada con él. Y no se mete en nada. Presta muy buenos servicios, pero se ríe de todo. Me trajo algunos libros de casa de Markélov; le conoce bien y le trata de Serguéi Mijáilovich. Y sería capaz de todo por Solomin.

-Y Tatiana también -observó Marianna-. ¿Por qué le son tan fieles las personas?

Nezhdánov no respondió.

-¿Qué libros te trajo Pável? -preguntó Marianna.

-Lo de costumbre. La «Historia de los cuatro hermanos»... Y además... lo de costumbre, todo conocido. De cualquier manera, los mejores.

Comentario [Librodot-147]: Skazka o chetyrioj brát'iaj". Panfleto político de crítica a la sociedad rusa.

Marianna miró alrededor, preocupada.

-¿Qué habrá sido de Tatiana? Prometió venir temprano...

-Aquí estoy -exclamó Tatiana, entrando en la habitación con un paquete en la mano. Estaba detrás de la puerta y había escuchado la exclamación de Marianna.

-Todavía hay tiempo... ¡vea!

Marianna corrió hacia ella.

-¿Lo trajo?

Tatiana dio una palmada en el paquete.

-Está todo aquí... absolutamente listo. Sólo tiene

que vestirlo... y todo el mundo quedará sorprendido.

-Vamos, vamos, Tatiana Ósipovna, es tan amorosa... Marianna la llevó a su habitación.

Una vez solo, Nezhdánov se paseó de un lado a otro una o dos veces con un paso extraño, bamboleante (imaginaba que los pequeños burgueses caminaban así), olió cuidadosamente las mangas, el interior del gorro, e hizo una mueca; se miró en el pequeño espejo colgado en la pared entre las ventanas, y meneó la cabeza: no tenía un aire muy agradable. «Tanto mejor», pensó. Después cogió algunos panfletos, se los metió en el bolsillo y dijo en voz baja:

-Muy bien... tíos... la fetén... vamos...

«Se parece», pensó de nuevo, «pero no será necesario representar. El traje lo dice todo.» Y recordó a un exiliado alemán que tuvo que cruzar toda Rusia sin saber casi la lengua del país. Pero gracias a un sombrero de mercader que había comprado en una pequeña ciudad de provincia, por todas partes le tomaron por un comerciante y consiguió llegar a la frontera.

En ese momento entró Solomin.

-¡Caramba! -exclamó-. Estás bien equipado. Perdona, hermano: con ese traje nadie te llamará de "usted" respetuosamente.

-Por favor... por favor... quería pedírtelo ya hace tiempo.

-Aún es temprano. Es mejor que te acostumbres antes. Bien, da igual. Pero hay que esperar: el dueño aún no se fue. Está en la cama.

-Saldré más tarde -respondió Nezhdánov-. Iré a explorar la vecindad, hasta que vengan nuevas órdenes.

-¡Magnífico! Pero atención, hermano Alexéi... ¿Puedo llamarle Alexéi?

-Alexéi, sólo. Si quieres, puedes llamarme Liksei -añadió Nezhdánov con una sonrisa.

-No, ¿para qué cambiar? Escucha: un buen consejo vale más que dinero. Veo que tienes panfletos. Puedes distribuirlos a quien quieras... pero ¡no en la fábrica!

-¿Por qué no?

-En primer lugar, porque seria peligroso para ti. En segundo lugar, porque yo prometí al propietario que no haría cosas de esas aquí. Después de todo, la fábrica es suya. En segundo lugar: ya hicimos aquí algunas cosas... una escuela, por ejemplo. Podrías echarlo todo a rodar. Opera por tu cuenta, como sabes... y yo no te interferiré, pero en mi fábrica no.

-La prudencia en el que la tiene, muchos daños y males previene... ¿eh? -observó Nezhdánov con media sonrisa sarcástica.

Solomin sonrió como era habitual en él.

-Exactamente, mi caro Alexéi, prudencia en el que la tiene. Pero, ¿qué veo? ¿Dónde estamos?

Estas últimas palabras se referían a Marianna, que había aparecido en la puerta de su habitación con un vestido estampado que ya había sido lavado muchas veces, con un pañuelo amarillo sobre los hombros y otro rojo en la cabeza. Tatiana venía tras ella y la miraba con su sonrisa benévola. Marianna parecía más fresca y joven en su traje simple, el cual le sentaba mejor que el caftán a Nezhdánov.

-Vasili Fedótych, por favor, no ría -imploró Marianna y se ruborizó como una amapola.

-¡Qué bella pareja! -exclamó Tatiana aplaudiendo-. Tú, querido, no te enfades, pero al lado de mi pequeñuela no vales nada.

«Y está realmente encantadora», pensó Nezhdánov. «¡Oh, cómo la amo!»

-Vea -continuó Tatiana-, quiso que cambiáramos nuestros anillos. Me dio su anillo de oro por el mío de plata.

-Las muchachas simples no llevan sortijas de oro -observó Marianna.

Tatiana suspiró.

-Yo lo guardaré bien, querida, no se preocupe.

-Bien, siéntense, siéntense los dos -empezó Solomin, que durante todo ese tiempo, inclinando la cabeza, había estado mirando a Marianna-. Antes, ¿recuerdan?, las personas se sentaban siempre antes de que empezara un viaje. Y tenéis ante vosotros un camino largo y difícil.

Marianna, aún toda sonrojada, se sentó y a continuación lo hicieron también Nezhdánov y Solomin... y, por fin, Tatiana, ésta sobre un gran tronco de leña que estaba allí cerca.

Solomin los miró a todos sucesivamente.

-Apartémonos para ver

Lo bien sentados que estamos -

murmuró Solomin, frunciendo levemente la frente. Y, de repente, rió, pero con tanta naturalidad que no sólo no ofendió a nadie sino que, por lo contrario, todos lo celebraron.

Pero Nezhdánov se levantó súbitamente.

-Yo voy a salir -dijo-, voy a salir ya. Todo esto es muy bonito pero se parece un poco a un vodevil con guardarropa incluido. No te preocupes -exclamó, volviéndose hacia Solomin-, no me meteré con el personal de tu fábrica. Voy a tantear a la gente de las cercanías y te contaré mis experiencias cuando vuelva, Marianna, si tengo algo para contarte. Dame tu mano y deséame suerte.

-¿No tomas antes un poco de té? -preguntó Marianna.

-No. ¿Té para qué? Si lo necesito, ya entraré a un mesón o a una taberna.

Tatiana movió la cabeza.

-Por aquí los mesones están tan llenos como de pulgas una oveja. Se sientan todos en la misma mesa...

-Adiós, hasta la vista... ¡y suerte! -dijo en voz baja Nezhdánov, empezando ya su papel de pequeño burgués comerciante. Pero aún no había tenido tiempo de llegar a la puerta cuando, del corredor, surgió ante él la nariz de Pável que, entregándole una vara alta, fina, con cortes, dijo:

-Coja esto, Alexéi Dmítrich, y llévela al caminar... y cuanto más lejos de sí la mantenga mejor.

Nezhdánov cogió la vara sin decir una palabra y salió. Pável le siguió. Tatiana quería ir también, pero Marianna la detuvo.

-Espere, Tatiana Ósipovna, la necesito.

-Vuelvo en seguida con el samovar. Su amigo salió sin tomar el té, iba con tanta prisa... Pero usted no tiene porqué hacer lo mismo. Más tarde, todo estará más claro.

Tatiana salió. Solomin se levantó también. Marianna se puso de pie y quedó de espaldas a él; cuando finalmente se volvió, vio que él no había dicho nada durante mucho tiempo, que había una expresión de sorpresa en su rostro, en sus ojos, una expresión que nunca había visto en él: una expresión de interrogación, de ansiedad, casi de curiosidad. Quedó turbada y sonrojada de nuevo. Pero Solomin casi tuvo conciencia de lo que ella había advertido en su rostro y empezó a hablar más alto que habitualmente.

-Bien, bien, Marianna... Ya ha empezado, pues.

-¿Qué comienzo, Vasili Fedótich? ¿Qué comienzo es éste? Me siento muy incómoda. Alexéi tiene razón: todo esto parece una comedia.

Solomin se sentó de nuevo.

-Por favor, Marianna... Pero ¿cómo se imaginó el *comienzo?* Seguro que no era de pie en las barricadas agitando una bandera y gritando: «¡Hurra! ¡Por la república!» Eso no es para las mujeres. Hoy usted empezará a enseñar cualquier cosa útil a una Lukeria cualquiera, y no será fácil, porque esa Lukeria no la comprendrá ni usted a ella, y además, a ella no le hace falta nada de lo que le quiere enseñar, no le servirá para nada. Y dentro de dos o tres semanas lo intentará con otra Lukeria y, entretanto, lavará un bebé aquí, enseñará allí el abecé a otro, o dará un medicamento a un enfermo... éste será su comienzo.

-Pero ¡eso es lo que hacen las hermanas de la caridad, Vasili Fedótich! Entonces ¿para que tengo yo que hacer... todo esto? -Marianna se señaló a sí misma y alrededor con un movimiento vago de la mano-. Fue otra cosa lo que siempre había soñado.

-¿No quería sacrificarse?

Los ojos de Marianna centellearon.

-¡Sí... sí... sí!

-¿Y Nezhdánov?

Marianna se encogió de hombros.

¿Qué hay con Nezhdánov? Iremos juntos... o iré sola.

Solomin miró fijamente a Marianna.

-Sabe, Marianna... perdóneme la rudeza de la expresión... pero en mi opinión, peinar la cabeza de un niño sarnoso es un sacrificio, y un gran sacrificio, del que pocas personas son capaces.

-No me negaría a eso, Vasili Fedótych.

-¡Sé que no se negaría! Sí, sería capaz de eso. Y lo hará durante un cierto tiempo, pero después, perdone, querrá otra cosa.

-Pero para eso tengo que aprender con Tatiana.

-Muy bien... aprenda. Lavará ollas y desplumará gallinas... Y, quién sabe, ¡quizá salve a la patria de esa manera!

-Se ríe de mí, Vasili Fedótych.

Solomin movió la cabeza lentamente.

-Oh, mi querida Marianna, créame: yo no me río de usted. En mis palabras hay sólo la verdad desnuda. Usted, todas vosotras, mujeres rusas, estáis ya más avanzadas que nosotros, los hombres.

Marianna alzó los ojos.

-Me gustaría estar a la altura de sus esperanzas, Solomin... y entonces podría morirme.

Solomin se levantó.

-No, viva... ¡viva! Eso es el principal. A propósito, ¿no le gustaría saber qué pasa en su casa a causa de su huida? ¿Harán algo? Basta que diga una palabra a Pável y él sabrá todo en seguida.

Marianna quedó sorprendida.

-¡Qué hombre tan extraordinario!

-Sí... asombroso. Y cuando quiera casarse con Alexéi, él también tratará de todo con Zósimo... ¿Recuerda que le hablé de ese cura?... Pero quizá aún no sea necesario, ¿verdad?

-Aún no.

-Sea.

Solomin fue hasta la puerta que separaba las dos habitaciones, la de Marianna y la de Nezhdánov, y se inclinó ante la cerradura.

-¿Qué mira? -preguntó Marianna.

-¿Cierra bien?

-Sí -murmuró Marianna.

Solomin se volvió hacia ella, que tenía los ojos bajos.

-Entonces ¿no es necesario preocuparse con las intenciones de los Sipiaguin? -exclamó él alegremente-. ¿Verdad?

Solomin iba a salir.

-Vasili Fedótych...

-¿Cómo?

¿Por qué razón usted, que es siempre tan callado, es tan hablador conmigo? No sabe cómo me agrada.

-¿Por qué? -Solomin tomó las manos pequeñas y suaves de la muchacha en sus palmas grandes y viriles-. ¿Por qué? Bien, quizá sea porque la quiero mucho. ¡Adiós!

Salió... Marianna quedó pensativa, le siguió con la mirada. Después fue en busca de Tatiana, que aún no había tenido tiempo de traerle el samovar. Tomó té con ella, pero también lavó algunas ollas y desplumó una gallina, y hasta peinó el pelo crespo de un niño. Cerca de la hora de cenar, volvió a su habitación... y Nezhdánov no tardó en llegar.

Llegó cansado y lleno de polvo y se dejó caer sin más en el sofá. Ella se sentó en seguida a su lado. -¿Entonces? ¿Entonces? ¡Cuenta!

-¿Recuerdas aquellos dos versos? -respondió él con un hilo de voz-:

Sería muy divertido
si no fuese tan triste…

Comentario [Librodot-148]: Versos de un poema de Lérmontov.

¿Recuerdas?

-Claro que los recuerdo.

-Pues esos versos se aplican admirablemente a mi primera salida. ¡Pero, no! En primer

lugar, llegué a la conclusión de que no hay nada más fácil que representar un papel. Nadie desconfiaba de mí. Pero hubo una cosa con la que no contaba: es necesario tener preparada con anticipación una historia cualquiera... para cuando nos pregunten: «¿De dónde vienes? ¿Qué vienes a hacer?»... y no sabemos qué responder. Pero, por otro lado, eso aún no es lo más importante. Basta entrar en una taberna, beber un vaso y mentir a gusto.

-Y tú... ¿mentiste? -preguntó Marianna.

-Claro, mentí... como pude. En segundo lugar, decididamente todo el mundo está insatisfecho, pero ¡nadie se preocupa de saber cómo curar esa insatisfacción! Y por lo que respecta a la propaganda... fue un desastre. Sólo conseguí dejar dos panfletos en una isba y meter uno en un carro de caballos... ¡Sólo Dios sabe lo que saldrá de ahí! Ofrecí panfletos a cuatro hombres. El primero preguntó si era un libro religioso y no quiso quedárselo. Otro dijo que no sabía leer, pero se lo llevó a los hijos... porque tenía un dibujo en la cubierta. El tercero empezó a decir sí a todo... «¡Sí-sañor, sí-sañor!»... pero acabó insultándome y tampoco se llevó ningún panfleto. Por fin, el cuarto se lo llevó, me lo agradeció mucho, pero no me parece que haya entendido nada de todo lo que le dije. Además, un perro me mordió en una pierna, una campesina me amenazó desde la puerta con una tenaza gritando: «¡Eh, granuja!» Y un soldado gritó: «¡Espera que ya te arreglaré yo!»... ¡y me sacó dinero para emborracharse!

-¿Y qué más?

-¿Qué más? Me ha salido una ampolla en el pie: una de las botas es demasiado grande. Y ahora tengo un hambre voraz... y la cabeza me estalla por culpa del vodka.

-Pero ¿bebiste mucho?

-No, sólo un poco, para dar ejemplo. Estuve en cinco tabernas. Pero no aguanto ese vodka abominable. ¡No entiendo cómo nuestro pueblo puede beber aquello! Si es necesario beber vodka para ser simplificado... ¡que no cuenten conmigo!

-¿Y nadie sospechó de ti?

-Nadie. Excepto un tabernero gordo, un tipo muy blanco, de ojos claros, que me miró con desconfianza. Y le oí decir a la mujer: «Cuidado con aquel tipo pelirrojo... un poco bizco» Te aseguro que hasta ese momento no sabía que era bizco. «Es un timador. ¿No ves la manera como *se engruda a* la bebida?» Sea como fuere, no comprendí qué quería decir con este *se engruda,* pero tampoco ganaba nada con eso. ¿Recuerdas el *mauvaiston*, en *El inspector,* de Gogol? Quizá fuera por eso

por lo que yo intentaba vaciar el vodka bajo la mesa. ¡Oh, qué difícil es, qué difícil para un esteta como yo entrar en contacto con la vida real!

-La próxima vez tendrás más suerte -le consoló Marianna-. Pero estoy contenta de que veas el lado humorístico de las cosas en tu primera tentativa. No te aburriste realmente, ¿verdad que no?

-No, claro. Incluso me he divertido. Pero ahora no sé qué acabaré realmente por pensar y si no acabaré por sentirme mal.

-¡No, no! No te dejaré pensar así. Ahora voy a contarte lo que hice yo. La cena llegará dentro de poco. A propósito, fue estupendo... lavé la olla donde Tatiana hizo la sopa. Voy a contártelo todo... todo, todo, con detalle.

Y lo hizo. Nezhdánov la escuchó y no consiguió apartar los ojos de ella... de tal forma que la muchacha paró algunas veces para preguntarle por qué razón la miraba así, pero él no respondió.

Después de la cena, ella se ofreció para leerle Spielhagen en voz alta. Pero no consiguió terminar la primera página, pues él se levantó repentinamente, fue junto a ella y cayó arrodillado. Marianna se enderezó y él le abrazó las rodillas con los dos brazos... y empezó a proferir palabras de amor, inconexas, desesperadas. Quería morir, sabía que moriría pronto... Ella no se conmovió. No hizo nada para evitar sus abrazos impetuosos y, tranquilamente, incluso le miraba de arriba abajo afectuosamente. Puso las dos manos en la cabeza febrilmente apretada contra su vestido. Pero la serenidad de Marianna tuvo un efecto sobre Nezhdánov peor que si le hubiese rechazado. Éste, levantándose, murmuró:

Comentario [Librodot-149]: Expresión de la carta de Jestakov en el acto V, escena VIII:
KOROBKIN: «El juez Liapkin Tiapkin... es el grado mayor del *mauvais ton...»* (Interrumpiendo la lectura) Seguramente es una palabra francesa...
AMMOS FEDOROVICH: ¡Diablos!... ¡Ni sé lo que significa!... Ya sería bastante que significara canalla; pero puede que sea algo peor.
(El inspector, trad. Irene Tchernova, Barcelona, Ed. Sopena, 1965.)

Comentario [Librodot-150]: Friedrich Spielhagen (1829-1911), escritor alemán, defensor de las ideas liberales, muy popular en Rusia por su novela *Marea violenta* (Sturmflut), sobre la sociedad alemana en el período de las revoluciones de 1848. Se debe tener en cuenta que los acontecimientos de 1848, que sacudieron toda Europa, dirigidos contra los regímenes autoritarios y con exaltación de los sentimientos nacionales, tuvieron una gran repercusión en Rusia, donde produjeron un período de especial represión.

Librodot

-Perdóname, Marianna, por lo de hoy y por lo de ayer. Dime que estás dispuesta a esperar hasta que yo sea digno de tu amor... y perdóname.

-Te di mi palabra... y no vuelvo atrás.

-Gracias. Adiós.

Nezhdánov salió. Marianna se encerró en su habitación.

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Dos semanas después, en la misma habitación, Nezhdánov escribía a su amigo Silin, inclinado sobre la pequeña mesa de tres pies donde ardía una vela de sebo. Pasaba ya de medianoche. En el sofá, por el suelo, estaban esparcidas ropas sucias de fango, que habían quedado donde habían sido lanzadas; en los cristales de las ventanas resbalaba una lluvia fría, continua, y un viento fuerte, caliente, soplaba con grandes gemidos en el tejado.

«Querido Vladimir: No te digo dónde vivo; incluso esta carta será mandada por mensajero en una estación lejana, porque mi estancia aquí es secreta y revelarla significaría la ruina no sólo para mí. Tienes que saber que hace ya dos semanas que vivo con Marianna en una gran fábrica. Huimos de la casa de los Sipiaguin el mismo día que te escribí por última vez. Nos recibió un amigo, a quien llamaré Vasili. Es el jefe aquí, una excelente persona. Nuestra estancia en esta fábrica es temporal. Sólo hasta que llegue el momento de actuar. Sin embargo, juzgando por los acontecimientos que hemos vivido hasta ahora, será difícil que ese momento llegue. Me siento muy, muy mal, Vladímir. Antes que nada, debo decirte que, aunque haya huido con Marianna, vivimos hasta ahora como hermano y hermana... y ella me dijo que sería mía si... si yo siento el derecho de exigírselo.

»Y yo, Vladímir, no me siento con ese derecho. Ella confía en mí, en mi honor... y no la engañaré. Sé que nunca amé ni amaré a nadie (¡de eso estoy convencido!) más que a ella. Sin embargo, ¿cómo podría atar su destino al mío para siempre? ¿Un ser vivo con un cadáver? No, no un cadáver: un ser semimuerto. ¿Dónde estaría mi conciencia? Tu puedes decir: si hubiera una gran pasión, la conciencia se callaría. Pero esa es la cuestión: soy un cadáver, un cadáver bien intencionado, honrado si quieres. Por favor, no digas que yo exagero siempre... ¡Todo lo que te digo es la pura verdad! Marianna tiene una naturaleza muy reservada y ahora está totalmente concentrada en su actividad, en la que cree... Y yo...

»Bien, no hablemos más de amor y felicidad personal y todo eso. Hace ya dos semanas que voy "hasta el pueblo"... y no es posible imaginar nada más estúpido. Claro que la culpa es más mía que de la causa en sí misma. No soy un fanático, no soy uno de aquellos que se *regeneran* en contacto con el pueblo, no consigo calentar su pecho como una camiseta de franela... quiero actuar en él. Pero ¿cómo? ¿Cómo conseguirlo? Acontece que cuando estoy con el pueblo, sólo escucho, y cuando llega el momento en que soy yo quien debe hablar... no sé que decir. Yo mismo siento que no sirvo, siento que soy un mal actor en un papel que no es para él. La conciencia y el escepticismo son inútiles, como también lo es encararme con humor... ¡No vale la pena! Es horrible recordar, es horrible mirar los trapos que yo visto... esta mascarada, como le llama Vasili. Dicen que es necesario primero aprender el idioma del pueblo, conocer sus hábitos y costumbres... ¡Es estúpido, es estúpido! Es necesario creer en lo que decimos, y decir lo que queremos. Una vez fui a escuchar una especie de profeta cismático. No puedes imaginar las cosas absurdas que decía en una especie de lenguaje eclesiástico y libresco con expresiones populares... ni ruso era, sino más bien una especie de dialecto... "A ostedes" en vez de "a ustedes", "ies" en vez de es, "a" en vez de "y"... y todo eso impetuosamente, como si fuera un gallo. "Volví al arma... volví al arma..." en lugar de "alma". Y con los ojos brillándole, la voz honda y repetitiva, el puño cerrado, como si fuera de hierro. Los mujiks escuchaban y no comprendían... pero se arrodillaban. Y le seguían. Pero cuando yo empiezo a hablar, parece que soy culpable de algo y que estoy pidiendo disculpas. Tendría que juntarme con los inconformistas... En serio, aunque su sabiduría no sea grande... ¡pero

tienen fe, fe! Marianna cree. Trabaja desde la mañana hasta la noche con Tatiana, una campesina de aquí, buena y lista; sin embargo, dice delante nuestro que queremos simplificarnos y nos llama almas simples. Porque Marianna trabaja con esta campesina, no tiene un minuto para sentarse conmigo... ¡una auténtica hormiga! Está muy satisfecha por tener las manos rojas y porque le salen callos y, en medio de todo esto, está dispuesta, si es necesario, a subir al patíbulo. Sí, ¡al patíbulo! Incluso llegó a dejar de lado los zapatos: fue a un lugar descalza. La oí después lavándose los pies durante mucho rato y la vi caminar con mucho cuidado porque tenía los pies doloridos, pero todo su rostro irradiaba alegría, como si hubiese encontrado un tesoro, como si el sol la iluminara. Sí, Marianna es estupenda. Pero cuando intento conversar con ella de lo que siento, en primer lugar me siento avergonzado como si estuviera ensuciando algo que no fuera mío; en segundo lugar, aquella mirada suya... Oh, aquella mirada terrible, devota, irresistible... "Tómame, querido... ¡pero *recuerda!...* ¿Para qué todo esto? No habrá otras cosas mejores y más elevadas en la tierra?" O sea, con otras palabras: viste tu caftán maloliente y ve hasta el pueblo... Y ya está, y yo voy...

»Oh, ¡como detesto entonces esta sensibilidad, esta delicadeza, este nerviosismo, este tedio, todo lo que heredé de mi padre aristócrata! ¿Qué derecho tenía él de echarme a esta vida con cualidades inadecuadas para el medio donde tengo que vivir? Criar un ave... ¿y echarla al agua? ¡Una estrella en medio de la basura! ¡Un demócrata, un amante del pueblo, que queda en seguida asqueado con una bocanada de ese vodka podrido... ese "alcohol verde"!

Pero ¿para qué echar las culpas a mi padre? Yo mismo me hice demócrata. Soy el único responsable.

»Sí, Vladímir, estoy mal. ¡Estoy lleno de pensamientos negros, depresivos! Quizá me preguntes si hasta el presente, en estas dos semanas, no encontré nada que me consolara, ningún ser vivo bueno, aunque inconciente. ¿Cómo explicártelo? Sí, lo encontré... Un hombre incluso muy decente, bastante listo. Pero por más que lo intentara no conseguí llegar hasta él. ¡No me necesita, ni a mí ni a mis panfletos! Es Pável (el brazo derecho de Vasili, un hombre listo y prudente, un futuro "jefe"... creo haberte escrito sobre él) y tiene un amigo, un mujik llamado Elizar... también listo, y un alma libre sin ninguna directiva... Pero cuando está conmigo es como si una pared se levantara entre nosotros. Veo en seguida un "no"en su cara. Y hay aún otro tipo... pero es muy irritable. "Vamos, barin", me dijo, "no se desvíe. Diga lo que tenga que decir directamente. Dígame una cosa: ¿va a distribuir inmediatamente todas sus tierras?" "¡Pero yo no soy un barin!", le respondo. Y él aún rezonga: "¡Dios te ayude! Entonces, si eres uno de los nuestros, ¿por qué no tienes más tino? ¡Y déjame en paz, si haces el favor!"

»Y aún una cosa más. Me he dado cuenta de que si alguien me escucha con mucha atención y se lleva los panfletos, puedes tener la certeza de que es un idiota, un indeseable. O das con un lengüilargo... de los educados, que sólo saben repetir la misma palabra, una palabra que, por alguna razón, les agradó. Uno de ellos, por ejemplo, me torturó diciendo que para él todo era "producción". Fuese lo que fuese lo que yo dijera, él insistía: "¡Es eso, no sé si me entiende, es producción!" ¡Al Diablo! Sólo una observación más... ¿Recuerdas, hace bastante tiempo, cuando se hablaba de las personas "superfluas", de los Hamlets? Pues esas "personas superfluas" se encuentran hoy entre los campesinos. Claro que tienen sus características propias... y tienen tendencia, en su mayor parte, a la tuberculosis. Son tipos interesantes... y vienen hasta nosotros rápidamente, pero son totalmente inútiles para la causa, como los antiguos Hamlets. Bien, ¿qué podemos hacer? ¿Montar una imprenta clandestina? Ya tenemos panfletos en exceso. Y algunos hasta dicen: "Haga la señal de la cruz y coja el hacha!" Y otros: "Coja el hacha simplemente". ¿O escribir novelas llenas de acción sobre la vida de los campesinos? No serían publicadas. ¿O será mejor coger el hacha? ¿Para que el soldado del Estado nos abata con un fusil del Estado? Sería sólo una manera complicada de suicidio. Sería mejor acabar yo mismo conmigo. Por lo menos sabría cuándo y cómo y escogería el lugar donde disparar.

»De hecho, me parece que, si en cualquier país estallara una guerra popular, yo participaría, no para liberar fuera quien fuera (¡liberar a otros, cuando los nuestros no son

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libres!), sino para terminar conmigo...

»Nuestro amigo Vasili, que nos dio refugio aquí, es un hombre feliz: está de nuestro lado, pero está muy tranquilo. No consigo acuciarle. Con otro me habría enfadado... pero con él no puedo. Y acontece que todo el secreto no está en sus convicciones, sino en su carácter. Vasili tiene un temperamento que no es posible instigar. Pero él tiene razón. Pasa mucho tiempo con nosotros, con Marianna. Lo que me sorprende es que yo la quiero y ella me quiere (te veo sonreír al leer esta frase, pero, ¡válgame Dios!, es exactamente así), pero no tenemos casi nada que decirnos el uno al otro. Pero con él está siempre discutiendo, argumentando, y escuchándole. No tengo celos. El intenta conseguirle una plaza en cualquier parte; ella se lo pide constantemente; pero me siento amargado cuando los miro. Y puedes creerme: basta que yo deje caer una palabra sobre la boda y ella está inmediatamente de acuerdo y el reverendo Zósimo entra inmediatamente en escena... "Isaías, ¡alégrate!" y todo como debe ser. Pero eso no me facilitaría las cosas, *y nada cambiaría...* Para donde me vuelva, no encuentro ninguna salida. La vida me mutiló, querido Vladímir, como, ¿recuerdas?, decía nuestro conocido sastre borracho quejándose de su mujer.

»Sin embargo, siento que esto no va a durar mucho tiempo. Siento que algo se prepara...

»¿Yo mismo no he repetido que es necesario "empezar"? Pues aquí ya empezamos.

»No me acuerdo si te hablé de otro amigo mío, un pariente de los Sipiaguin. Acabará por meterse en un lío de donde no podrá salir.

»Quería terminar ya esta carta, ¡pero qué! Me parece que nada tiene importancia y, sin embargo, escribo versos. No los leo a Marianna y ella no tiene grandes deseos de escucharlos, y tú... a veces los elogias. Pero lo principal es no molestar a nadie. Fui alcanzado por un fenómeno muy común en Rusia... Sin embargo, aquí van estos versos:

»SUEÑO

Tras larga ausencia a la patria volví...
Sin encontrar allí ningún cambio.
La misma estagnación absurda y muerta,
Casas sin tejado, paredes derribadas,
Y la misma basura, pobreza y agonía.
La misma mirada servil, insolente o caída...
Nuestro pueblo ahora es libre, y el brazo libre
Cuelga como antes el látigo a la cintura.
Todo igual... En una sola cosa
Europa y Asia, todo el mundo traspasamos...
Nunca antes un tan terrible sueño
Había oprimido mi amado pueblo.

Todos duermen alrededor, en pueblos y ciudades,
En carros, trineos, día y noche, sentados y de pie...
El mercader y el funcionario, y el centinela
En la nieve y en el frío y en el calor ardiente.
Y los juzgados duermen, y el juez ronca;
Como muertos siembran y cogen los mujiks,
Duerme el padre, la madre, toda la familia duerme...
Todos duermen. El que pega y el que aguanta.

Sólo en la taberna del zar ése no pega el ojo.
Con la botella cogida por el puño fuerte,
La frente en el Polaco, el talón en el Cáucaso,

Duerme el sueño eterno la Rusia Sagrada.

»Perdona. No quería enviarte una carta tan triste sin divertirte un poco al final (¡ciertamente encontrarás algunos defectos técnicos por lo menos!). ¿Cuándo te escribiré de nuevo? ¿Volveré a escribirte? Pero pase lo que pase, estoy seguro de que no olvidarás a tu devoto amigo A.N.

»P. D. -Sí, nuestro pueblo duerme... Pero me parece que si alguna cosa podría despertarle... no será lo que *nosotros* pensamos...»

Después de escribir la última línea, Nezhdánov dejó la pluma y, pensando: «Bien, ¡ahora es necesario dormir y olvidar todos estos disparates!», se tumbó... pero el sueño tardó en venir.

A la mañana siguiente, Marianna le despertó cuando cruzaba su habitación para ir a ver a Tatiana. Apenas había tenido tiempo de vestirse cuando la chica volvió. Tenía una expresión de alegría y ansiedad en el rostro y parecía excitada.

-Sabes, Aliosha: dicen que en la provincia de T., aquí cerca, ya empezó.

-¿Cómo? ¿Qué empezó? ¿Quién te lo dijo?

-Pável. Dicen que los campesinos se rebelaron y no quieren pagar los impuestos. Y que se reúnen.

-¿Quién te lo dijo?

-Tatiana. Pero aquí está Pável. Pregúntale.

Pável entró y confirmó las palabras de Marianna.

-¡Sí, en T. hay tumulto! dijo él, sacudiendo la barba y torciendo sus ojos negros y centelleantes-. Serguéi Mijáilovich debe de tener algo que ver con aquello. Hace ya cinco días que no vuelve a casa.

Nezhdánov cogió el sombrero.

-¿Adónde vas? -preguntó Marianna.

Al tumulto, claro -respondió él, sin levantar los ojos y frunciendo la frente-. Voy a T.

-Entonces *yo* te acompaño. Me llevas contigo, ¿verdad? Déjame sólo poner el chal grande.

-Esto no es para mujeres -dijo Nezhdánov irritado, con los ojos aún en el suelo, molesto.

-No... no! Haces bien en ir, o Markélov pensará que eres cobarde... Pero yo te acompaño.

-Yo no soy un cobarde -dijo Nezhdánov tristemente.

-Yo quería decir que él pensaría que ambos somos cobardes. Te acompaño.

Marianna fue a recoger el chal a su habitación, pero Pável dijo en voz baja, como si arrastrara la respiración: «Ah, ah», y desapareció. Corrió a avisar a Solomin.

Marianna aún no había vuelto, cuando Solomin entró en la habitación de Nezhdánov. Éste estaba cerca de la ventana, con la frente en la palma de la mano y la otramano en el cristal. Solomin le tocó en el hombro. Él se volvió bruscamente. Despeinado y sin lavarse, Nezhdánov tenia un aspecto salvaje y extraño. Solomin también había cambiado en los últimos tiempos. Estaba amarillo, con el rostro cansado y los dientes superiores aparecían ligeramente. También él parecía agitado, tanto cuanto su temperamento «equilibrado» lo permitía.

-Markélov no consiguió controlarse empezó-. Esto puede terminar mal para él en primer lugar... y también para otros.

-Yo quiero ir a ver lo que pasa... -exclamó Nezhdánov.

-Yo también -añadió Marianna, apareciendo en la puerta.

Solomin se volvió rápidamente hacia ella.

-Yo no le aconsejaría eso, Marianna. Puede denunciarse... y a nosotros, involuntariamente y sin ninguna necesidad. Que vaya Nezhdánov y vea cómo están las cosas, si quiere... y que no se quede allá mucho tiempo. Pero usted, ¿para qué?

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-Yo no quiero separarme de él.

-Pero va a estorbar sus movimientos.

Marianna miró a Nezhdánov. Este estaba inmóvil, con una expresión rígida y sombría.

-Y ¿si hay peligro?

Solomin sonrió.

-No tema... cuando haya peligro... la dejaré ir. Marianna se quitó de nuevo el chal de la cabeza y se sentó.

Entonces Solomin se volvió hacia Nezhdánov.

-Y tú, hermano, echa sólo una ojeada por allí. Quizá todo esto sean exageraciones. Pero ten cuidado, por favor. De todas maneras, tú tienes suerte. Y vuelve pronto. ¿Lo prometes? ¿Nezhdánov, lo prometes?

-Sí.

-¿Sí?... ¿En serio?

-¡Si aquí todos te obedecen, empezando por Marianna!

Nezhdánov salió hacia el pasillo sin despedirse. Pável surgió de la oscuridad y corrió por la escalera tras él, haciendo ruido con las botas de clavos. *Él* acompañaría a Nezhdánov.

Solomin se sentó al lado de Marianna.

-¿Oyó las últimas palabras de Nezhdánov?

-Sí. Está molesto porque yo le escucho más a usted que a él. Pero es cierto. Yo *le amo,* pero le escucho a *usted.* El me es querido... y usted está cerca de mí.

Solomin le pegó suavemente con la mano.

-Esta historia... es muy desagradable -observó el, por fin-. Si Markélov se metió en esto... está perdido. Marianna se estremeció.

-¿Perdido?

-Sí, él no hace las cosas a medias... y no se inhibe a causa de los otros.

-¡Perdido! -murmuró de nuevo Marianna, y las lágrimas le cayeron por las mejillas. ¡Ah, Vasili Fedótych! Qué lástima me da. Pero, ¿por qué no puede triunfar? ¿Por qué está irremediablemente perdido?

-Porque, Marianna, en empresas semejantes, los primeros pierden siempre, incluso cuando consiguen tener éxito... Y en esta empresa que *él* empezó, se perderán no sólo los primeros y los segundos, sino los décimos y los vigésimos...

-Entonces ¿nosotros no viviremos lo suficiente para ver la victoria?

-¿Qué se creía? Claro que no. Con estos ojos nuestros nunca veremos la victoria, con estos ojos vivos. Pero con los espirituales... eso es otra cosa. Podremos ver la victoria ahora mismo. Nada nos lo impide.

-Entonces, ¿por qué usted, Solomin...?

-¿Qué?

-¿Por qué sigue por este camino?

-Porque no hay otro. Quiero decir, que nuestro objetivo, mío y de Markélov, es el mismo, pero los caminos son diferentes.

-¡Pobre Serguéi Mijáilovich! -exclamó tristemente Marianna. Solomin de nuevo le tocó levemente la mano.

-Bien, bien, todavía no sabemos nada exactamente. Veremos las noticias que Pável nos trae. En nuestro ideal, tenemos que ser animosos. Los ingleses dicen: *«Never say* die». Es un buen proverbio. Mejor que el ruso: «Si la desgracia llama, ¡ábrele la puerta!» No vale la pena entristecerse anticipadamente.

Comentario [Librodot-151]: Nunca digas: morir.

Solomin se puso de pie.

¿Y la plaza que me quería encontrar? -preguntó, de repente, Marianna. Todavía le brillaban lágrimas en el rostro, pero ya no tenía los ojos tristes.

Solomin se sentó de nuevo.

¿Tanta prisa tiene por marcharse?

-¡Oh, no! Pero querría ser útil!

-¡Usted es muy útil aquí, Marianna! No nos abandone, por favor, espere un poco.

¿Quiere algo? -preguntó Solomin al ver que Tatiana entraba. Sólo tuteaba a Pável, y eso porque éste se hubiera sentido muy infeliz si Solomin le tratara de "usted".

-Está aquí una especie de mujer preguntando por Alexéi Dmítrich -respondió Tatiana riendo y gesticulando con las manos. Dije que ni siquiera sabemos quién es ese individuo. Y entonces él...

-Él ¿quién?...

-Esa especie de mujer. Escribió su nombre en este papel y dijo que lo mostrara... que lo trajera y que si el propio Alexéi Dmítrich no estuviera en casa, ella puede esperar.

En el papel estaba escrito con grandes letras: Mashúrina.

-Hágala entrar dijo Solomin-. ¿No le importa que entre, Marianna? Es también una de las nuestras. -De ninguna manera.

Algunos momentos después, Mashúrina apareció en la puerta, con el mismo vestido con que la habíamos visto al inicio del primer capítulo.

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NEZHDÁNOV no está? -preguntó Mashúrina. Después vio a Solomin y, dirigiéndose a él, le alargó la mano-. ¿Cómo está, Solomin?

A Marianna sólo la miró de reojo.

-No tardará -respondió Solomin-. Pero, dígame, por favor, ¿cómo supo...?

-Por Markélov. Sin embargo, en la ciudad... algunas personas ya conocen su paradero.

¿En serio?

-Sí. Alguien seguramente fue indiscreto. Y dicen que Nezhdánov fue reconocido.

-¡A pesar de su disfraz! -murmuró Solomin-. Permitan que las presente -dijo en voz alta-: La señorita Sinétskaia, la señorita Mashúrina. ¿No quiere sentarse? Mashúrina inclinó ligeramente la cabeza y se sentó.

-Tengo una carta para Nezhdánov y un mensaje para usted, Solomin.

-¿Un mensaje? ¿De quién?

-De un conocido suyo... Bien, y aquí... ¿todo está preparado?

-Nada está preparado.

Mashúrina abrió lo más que pudo sus ojos pequeños.

-¿Nada?

-Nada.

-¿Absolutamente nada?

-Absolutamente nada.

-¿Es eso lo que debo transmitir?

-Eso mismo.

Mashúrina quedó pensativa y se sacó un cigarillo del bolsillo.

-¿Tiene lumbre?

-Aquí tiene una cerilla.Mashúrina encendió la cerilla.

-Ellos esperaban otra cosa -empezó-. No esperaban eso. Sin embargo, el problema es suyo. Y yo no estaré aquí mucho tiempo. Sólo quiero encontrarme con Nezhdánov y entregarle una carta.

¿Adónde va?

-Muy lejos.

Iba exactamente a Ginebra, pero no lo quería decir a Solomin. No confiaba mucho en él y, además, había allí una persona «extraña». Enviaban a Mashúrina, que apenas sabía alemán, a Ginebra para entregar a una persona desconocida la mitad de una tarjeta con el dibujo de una vid y doscientos setenta y nueve rublos de plata.

-Y Ostrodúmov, ¿cómo está? ¿Está aquí?

-No. Pero está cerca... Está ocupado. Hasta que le llamen. No tardará. No hay razón para alarmarse.

-¿Cómo consiguió llegar aquí?

-En un carro... ¿de que otra manera podría venir? Déme otra cerilla...

Solomin le dio una cerilla encendida.

-¡Vasili Fedótych! -llamó de repente una voz desde el patio.

-¿Quién es? ¿Qué quiere?

-Venga, por favor -repitió la voz con insistencia-. Están aquí algunos obreros que quieren decir algo pero Pável Egórych no está.

Solomin se excusó, se levantó y salió.

Mashúrina se quedó mirando a Marianna y la observó durante tanto tiempo que ella se sintió incómoda.

-Perdóneme -dijo, de repente, con su voz abrupta, dura-. Yo soy una mujer simple y no sé... cómo decir las cosas. No se enfade y, si quiere, no responda. *¿Usted* es la muchacha que huyó de casa de los Sipiaguin?

Marianna quedó un poco sorprendida, pero dijo:

-Sí.

-¿Con Nezhdánov?

-Sí.

-Por favor... déme su mano. Perdóneme. Si él la ama, debe ser buena chica.

Marianna apretó la mano de Mashúrina.

-¿Conoce a Nezhdánov hace mucho tiempo?

-Sí. Le conocí en San Petersburgo. Por eso le hablé. Serguéi Mijáilich también me contó...

-¡Ah, Markélov! ¿Cuánto tiempo hace que estuvo con él?

-No hace mucho. Pero ahora se fue.

¿Adónde?

-Adonde le mandaron.

Marianna suspiró.

-Ah, señorita Mashúrina, temo por él.

-En primer lugar, no me gusta el tratamiento de señorita. Esas maneras hay que dejarlas de lado. En segundo lugar... usted dice: "temo". Tampoco sirve. Si no teme por sí misma, deje de temer por los demás. Si no piensa en usted, si no teme por los demás... todo irá bien. Claro que para mí es fácil hablar así. Yo soy fea. Y usted... es bonita. Debe ser más difícil para usted -Marianna bajó los ojos y se volvió-. Serguéi Mijáilovich me dijo... El sabía que yo tenía una carta para Nezhdánov... "No vayas allá", me dijo. "No lleves la carta. Lo trastornará todo por allá. ¡Quédate! Ellos son tan felices... ¡Déjalos en paz! ¡No los molestes!" Y me gustaría no molestar... pero ¿que iba a hacer con la carta?

-No deje de entregársela -dijo Marianna-. ¡Qué hombre tan bondadoso es Serguéi Mijáilovich! ¿Le matarán, Mashúrina? ¿O le enviarán a Siberia?

¿Y qué mal hay en ello? ¿No se vuelve de Siberia? Y en cuanto a lo de perder la vida... la vida para unos es dulce, para otros amarga. Y su vida no ha sido muy azucarada.

Mashúrina de nuevo miró a Marianna fija e interrogativamente.

-¡Qué bonita es! -exclamó por fin-. ¡Parece un pajarito! Creo que Alexéi no viene... ¿No sería mejor dejarle la carta a usted? ¿Para qué voy a esperar?

-Puede quedar tranquila que se la entregaré. Mashúrina apoyó el rostro en una de las manos y quedó callada durante un largo rato.

-Dígame -empezó ella-, perdóneme... ¿usted le ama mucho?

-Sí.

Mashúrina movió su cabeza pesada.

-¡Y claro está que no hay necesidad de preguntar si él la ama! Bien, se está haciendo tarde. Me voy. Dígale que estuve aquí... Preséntele mis saludos. Dígale que estuvo aquí Mashúrina. ¿No olvidará mi nombre? ¿No? Mashúrina. Y la carta... Espere, ¿dónde la habré

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metido?

Mashúrina dio una vuelta como si estuviera buscando en los bolsillos... y, llevándose rápidamente a la boca un pequeño papel, lo tragó.

-¡Ah, Dios mío! ¡Qué estupidez la mía! ¿Quieren creer que la perdí? Claro que sí. ¡Ah! Y si alguien la encuentra... No, no está en ninguna parte. ¡Finalmente fue como quería Serguéi Mijáilich!

-Busque mejor -murmuró Marianna.

Mashúrina sacudió la mano.

-No, no vale la pena. ¡La perdí!

Marianna se acercó a ella.

-Bien, entonces ¡béseme!

Mashúrina abrazó súbitamente a Marianna y la apretó contra su pecho con una fuerza poco femenina.

-No habría hecho esto por nadie -dijo ella con voz ronca-, contra mi conciencia... ¡y por primera vez! Dígale que tenga cuidado... Y usted también. ¡Cuidado! Pronto las cosas serán muy peligrosas por aquí. Marchen mientras haya tiempo... ¡Adiós! -añadió en voz alta y severa-. Ah, una cosa más... dígale... No, no hace falta. No es nada.

Salió dando un portazo y Marianna quedó perpleja en el centro de la habitación.

-¿Qué es esto? -exclamó por fin-. ¡Esta mujer le quiere más que yo! Y qué querían decir aquellas alusiones? Y ¿por qué salió Solomin de repente y no volvió?

Empezó a caminar de un lado para otro. Una extraña sensación de miedo, fastidio y sorpresa se apoderó de ella. ¿Por qué no fue con Nezhdánov? Solomin la había convencido... Pero ¿dónde estaba él? ¿Qué pasaba? Mashúrina no le había dado la carta ciertamente por amor a Nezhdánov... Pero ¿cómo se había decidido ella a tan gran desobediencia? ¿Quería mostrar su generosidad? ¿Con qué derecho? Y por que motivo *ella,* Marianna, se había sentido tan conmovida por aquel gesto? Una mujer fea se interesaba por un hombre joven... ¿Qué tenía de extraño? Y ¿por qué motivo Mashúrina había pensado que la relación de Marianna con Nezhdánov era más fuerte que el sentimiento del deber? ¿Y Marianna había pedido ese sacrificio? ¿Qué diría aquella carta? ¿Una orden de acción rápida? ¡Sin duda!

»¿Y Markélov? Está en peligro... y nosotros, ¿qué hacemos? Markélov nos mantiene al margen, nos da la posibilidad de ser felices, de no participar... ¿Qué es esto? ¿También generosidad... o desprecio? ¿Acaso huimos de aquella casa odiosa para estar todo el tiempo juntos arrullándonos como dos palomas?

Así pensaba Marianna y cada vez se hacía más fuerte en ella la vejación. Su amor propio estaba herido. ¿Por qué la habrían abandonado *todos?* Aquella mujer "gorda" le había llamado pajarito, beldad... ¿por qué no le habría llamado directamente "muñeca"? ¿Y por qué motivo Nezhdánov no fue solo sino con Pável? ¡Como si necesitara de un tutor! Sí, y ¿cuáles son realmente las convicciones de Solomin? El no era de ninguna manera un revolucionario. Incluso casi se podía pensar que no encaraba la causa con seriedad.

Estos eran los pensamientos que giraban, persiguiéndose y enredándose, en el cerebro febril de Marianna. Apretando los labios y cruzando los brazos como un hombre, se sentó finalmente junto a la ventana y se quedó inmóvil, sin apoyarse en el respaldo de la silla, toda ella en estado de alerta, muy tensa, preparada para saltar en cualquier momento. No quería ir a trabajar con Tatiana. Sólo deseaba una cosa: esperar. Y esperó, obstinada, casi enfadada. De vez en cuando tenía la sensación de ser extraña e incomprensible incluso hacia ella misma... Pero le daba igual. Incluso le pasó por la cabeza: »¿Tendré yo celos de ella?» Pero recordando la pobre figura de Mashúrina, se encogió de hombros y sacudió los brazos... no en realidad, sino en el pensamiento.

Marianna esperó mucho tiempo. Por fin, oyó pasos de dos personas subiendo la escalera. Clavó los ojos en la puerta... Los pasos se acercaron. La puerta se abrió y Nezhdánov, apoyado por el brazo de Pável, surgió en el umbral. Estaba mortalmente pálido, sin gorro, el pelo en desorden cayéndole en mechones mojados hacia la cara, mirando al frente sin decir nada. Pável le condujo a través de la habitación (los pies de Nezhdánov temblaban y estaban débiles) y le hizo sentarse en el diván.

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Marianna saltó de su lugar.

-¿Qué fue? ¿Qué le pasó? ¿Está enfermo?

Pero, mientras ayudaba a Nezhdánov, Pável respondió con una sonrisa, mirándola por encima del hombro:

-No se preocupe. Se le pasará en seguida... Es sólo porque no está acostumbrado.

Pero ¿qué tiene? -preguntó Marianna insistentemente.

-Está un poco borracho. Estuvo bebiendo con el estómago vacío, ¿sabe?

Marianna se inclinó sobre Nezhdánov, que estaba medio tumbado en el diván, con la cabeza oculta, los ojos cerrados... Apestaba a vodka: estaba borracho.

-¡Alexéi! -se le escapó.

El levantó con esfuerzo los párpados pesados e intentó sonreír.

-¡Ah, Marianna! -tartamudeó-. Tu siempre hablaste de s... sim... simplificación y ahora estoy verdaderamente simplificado. Porque el pueblo está siempre borracho... por eso...

Se calló, después murmuró algo incomprensible, cerró los ojos, y se durmió. Pável le tendió cuidadosamente en el diván.

-No se preocupe, Marianna Vikéntievna -repitió él-. Con una o dos horas de sueño se encontrará bien.

Marianna quería preguntarle cómo había ocurrido aquello, pero sus preguntas habrían hecho quedarse a Pável, y ella quería estar a solas... o sea, no quería que Pável siguiera viendo a Nezhdánov en aquel estado ante ella. Se alejó hacia la ventana, y Pável, que la había comprendido, cubrió cuidadosamente las piernas de Nezhdánov con la punta del caftán, le puso una almohada bajo la cabeza y observó de nuevo:

-No es nada.

Y salió de puntillas.

Marianna miró alrededor. La cabeza de Nezhdánov estaba pesadamente enterrada en la almohada; su rostro pálido tenía una expresión fija y muy intensa, como un enfermo en estado grave.

-¿Qué habrá sucedido? -pensó ella.

XI

Y esto fue lo que sucedió: En cuanto se sentó en el carro al lado de Pável, Nezhdánov entró en un estado de gran excitación. Apenas habían salido del patio de la fábrica y entraron en la carretera en dirección a T., empezó a gritar las cosas más absurdas a los mujiks que encontraban por el camino. «¿Por qué motivo estáis dormidos? ¡Levantaos! ¡Ya es hora! ¡Abajo los impuestos! ¡Abajo los propietarios!» Algunos mujiks le miraban sorprendidos, otros se apartaban sin prestarle atención, pensando que estaba borracho. Uno de ellos, cuando llegó a casa, dijo que había encontrado a un francés en el camino, que gritaba "unas cosas incomprensibles, que no se entendían". Nezhdánov tenía suficiente criterio para comprender que era increíblemente absurdo y hasta estúpido loque hacía, pero había caído en tal estado de "excitación", que ya no sabía qué era absurdo y qué no. Pável intentó calmarle, diciéndole que no podía comportarse así, que pronto entrarían en un pueblo importante, el primero del distrito de T., Babi Kliuchí, y que allá podrían saber... Pero Nezhdánov no se calmó... y por primera vez su rostro tuvo una expresión infeliz, casi desesperada. El caballo era extremadamente vivo, robusto, con la crinera esquilada en el cuello delgado. Tiraba muy bien de las riendas y sus patas fuertes y pequeñas corrían cuanto podían, como si supieran que llevaban personas importantes a una acción importante. Antes de llegar a Babi Kliuchí, Nezhdánov vio, al borde de la carretera, ante las puertas cerradas de un almacén de trigo, a una docena de mujiks. Saltó en seguida del carro, corrió hacia ellos y, durante cinco minutos, les habló apresuradamente, con gritos, agitando los brazos violentamente. Las palabras «¡Por la libertad! ¡Adelante! ¡Hagamos girar la rueda!» podían distinguirse entre muchas otras

menos comprensibles. Los campesinos, que se habían reunido delante del almacén para discutir cómo llenarlo de nuevo, aunque sólo fuera para mostrar que hacían algo (era un almacén comunal y por esta razón estaba vacío), clavaron sus ojos en Nezhdánov y, aunque parecía que le escuchaban con mucha atención, no comprendieron nada, porque cuando él, finalmente, volvió la espalda, después de gritar por última vez: «¡Libertad!», uno de ellos observó:

-¡Debe de ser un funcionario!

A lo que el más listo respondió:

-Ya se sabe... él no habla así porque sí. ¡Lo que quiere es nuestro dinero!

Nezhdánov subió de nuevo al carro y, sentándose junto a Pável, pensó:

«¡Señor! ¡Qué absurdo es todo esto! Pero ninguno de nosotros sabe cómo hacerse comprender por el pueblo. ¿Quizá de esta manera? ¡No se puede saber! ¡Adelante! ¿Tu alma sufre? Pues ¡que sufra!»

Se encontraron en la calle principal. Justo en el medio había un grupo de personas delante de una taberna. Pável intentó detener a Nezhdánov, pero éste saltó del asiento del carro y gritó: -¡Hermanos!...

Se apartaron un poco para dejarle pasar y Nezhdánov volvió de nuevo a predicar sin mirar a nadie, como si estuviera enfadado y llorando. Pero allí el resultado no fue el mismo que en la primera tentativa. Un tipo enorme, sin barba pero con una cara feroz, que vestía una pequeña chaqueta muy sucia, botas altas y gorro de piel de carnero, llegó cerca de Nezhdánov y le dio una palmada en el hombro:

-¡Cojonudo! ¡Bravo! -le gritó con un vozarrón-. Pero, ¡espera! ¿No sabes que una lámina seca no corta bien? ¡Venga! Es mucho mejor conversar aquí.

Empujó a Nezhdánov hacia la taberna y el grupo fue tras ellos.

-¡Mijéich! -gritó al fin-. ¡Diez copecks del bueno! ¡De mi especial! ¡Para complacer a un amigo! Quién es él, de dónde viene y cuál es su origen... nadie lo sabe. ¡Bebe! -dijo volviéndose hacia Nezhdánov y entregándole un pesado vaso lleno, mojado por fuera como si estuviera sudando-. ¡Bebe, si sientes algo por nosotros!

-¡Bebe! -gritó al mismo tiempo un coro de voces.

Nezhdánov cogió el vaso (parecía sofocado) y gritó:

-¡A vuestra salud, chicos! -y se lo tomó de un trago.

¡Uf! Lo bebió con el mismo coraje desesperado con que se habría lanzado al asalto de una batería o contra una fila de bayonetas... Pero, ¿qué le estaba pasando? Algo había chocado contra su espalda, contra sus piernas, le quemaba la garganta, el pecho, el estómago, le hizo que le saltaran lágrimas de los ojos... Un estremecimiento, fruto de la repugnancia le recorrió todo el cuerpo y casi le dominó... Empezó a gritar todo lo que le venía a la cabeza para intentar calmarse. La oscura taberna se volvió, de repente, caliente y pesada y sofocante... ¡había gente por todas partes! Nezhdánov empezó a hablar, a hablar sin parar, a gritar furiosamente, desesperadamente, apretando manos grandes y endurecidas, besando caras mal afeitadas... El tipo alto con el chaleco sucio le besó también, casi aplastándole las costillas. Era un auténtico monstruo.

Comentario [Librodot-152]: No debe olvidarse la costumbre tradicional rusa de besar: un beso en cada mejilla y un tercero beso en la boca, normalmente con un abrazo fuerte.

-Le rompo el cuello -gritó éste-, ¡a quien ofenda a nuestro hermano le rompo el cuello! Aun más... le mato... ¡Hago de él picadillo! Miradme, fui matarife y ¡soy muy bueno en estas cosas! -y mostró un puño enorme cubierto de pecas.

Y entonces -¡Señor!- alguien gritó: «¡Bebe!», y Nezhdánov tragó otra vez aquel veneno asqueroso. Pero esta vez fue verdaderamente terrible. Unos ganchos embotados parecían destripar sus entrañas. La cabeza le daba vueltas a través de círculos verdes. Se oyó un zumbido... ¡Oh, horror!... Un tercer vaso... ¿Conseguiría vaciarlo? Le rodeaban narices rojas, melenas llenas de polvo, cuellos ennegrecidos cubiertos de arrugas. Unas manos fuertes le cogieron.

-¡Adelante! -aullaron unas voces enfadadas-. ¡Habla! Anteayer, otro forastero habló también así. ¡Venga!...

Librodot

La tierra empezó a ondear bajo los pies de Nezhdánov. Su propia voz le parecía extraña, como si viniera de muy lejos... ¿Sería la muerte?

Y de golpe... una racha de aire frío le azotó la cara y no había más empujones ni narices rojas ni olor a alcohol, a pieles de carnero, a alquitrán, a cuero... Estaba de nuevo sentado al lado de Pável, en el carro, de nuevo luchando y gritando:

-¿Adónde vas? ¡Para! Aún no he podido decirles... tengo que explicar... -y después añadió-: ¿Y qué piensas tú, bellaco?

A lo que Pável le respondió:

-Claro que sería bueno si no hubiera señores y la tierra fuera nuestra. ¿Quién 19 duda? Pero la orden todavía no ha llegado.

Pável hizo girar lentamente el caballo y, atizándole con el látigo, se alejaron, al galope, de la taberna... de vuelta a la fábrica...

Nezhdánov se durmió con los balanceos del carro. El viento jugueteaba agradablemente en su rostro y no permitía que le surgieran nuevos pensamientos...

Sólo sentía que con toda aquella bulla no le hubieran dejado decir todo lo que quería decir... Y de nuevo el viento le acarició el rostro excitado.

Y entonces vislumbró fugazmente a Marianna, a la vez que sentía una sensación ardiente de vergüenza y sueño, un sueño hondo, pesado...

Todo esto contó después Pável a Solomin. No le ocultó que no había impedido a Nezhdánov que bebiera... ya que, de no haber sido así, no le habría podido arrancar después de aquel torbellino. Los otros no le hubieran dejado.

-Cuando ya parecía muy débil, les pedí con una reverencia: «Queridos y honrados señores, dejad que el muchacho se vaya. Como podéis ver, está enfermo...» Contestaron que sólo le dejarían marchar si les daba a cambio medio rublo. Y se lo di.

-Hiciste bien -le elogió Solomin.

Nezhdánov dormía y Marianna se quedó sentada junto a la ventana mirando la cerca. De una manera muy extraña, los pensamientos furiosos, casi dolorosos, que la habían agitado hasta el regreso de Nezhdánov y Pável, la abandonaron. No sentía por Nezhdánov ni repulsión ni rencor: sólo pena. Sabía perfectamente que éste no era un libertino ni un borracho y pensaba ya en lo que le diría cuando se despertara, algo amistoso y afectivo, sin duda, para que no se sintiera demasiado avergonzado. «Tengo que hacer que él mismo me explique lo que pasó.»

No estaba preocupada, sino triste... desesperanzadamente triste. Tenía la sensación de que un soplo de la atmósfera de aquel mundo adonde se dirigía había venido hacia ella... y se estremeció por lo rudo y triste que era. ¿A qué Moloc se preparaba ella para sacrificarse?

Pero ¡no! ¡No podía ser! Aquello era un simple incidente que pronto olvidaría. Una impresión momentánea, que la había sorprendido tanto por lo inesperada. Se levantó, se acercó al diván donde estaba Nezhdánov, le pasó la mano por la frente pálida, que incluso durmiendo tenía un aire apenado, y le alisó el pelo...

De nuevo sintió lástima de él, como una madre la siente por el hijo enfermo. Pero era en cierta manera doloroso mirarle, y se fue sin hacer ruido a su habitación. Ni siquiera cerró la puerta con llave.

No se entregó a ningún trabajo y se sentó de nuevo, y de nuevo le vinieron extraños pensamientos. Sentía cómo pasaba el tiempo, los minutos corrían, e incluso gozaba con ello. El corazón le latía con fuerza y de nuevo le pareció que esperaba algo.

¿Que había pasado con Solomin?

La puerta se abrió suavemente y Tatiana entró.

-¿Qué quiere? -preguntó Marianna, casi molesta. -Marianna Vikéntievna -empezó Tatiana en voz baja-. No se preocupe. Estas cosas pasan. Y aún, gracias a Dios...

-No estoy nada preocupada, Tatiana Ósipovna -la interrumpió Marianna-. Alexéi Dmítrich no se siente muy bien, pero no es nada grave.

-¡Claro que no! Cuando vi que mi Marianna Vikéntievna no aparecía, pregunté qué pasaba. Pero aun así no quise venir porque es mejor no interferir. Pero ahora apareció una

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persona, ¡quién sabe quién es! Es pequeño y cojo ¡y pregunta por Alexéi Dmítrich! Qué extraño: esta mañana aquella mujer... y ahora este cojo. «Si Alexéi Dmítrich no está», dijo él, «quiero hablar con Vasili Fedótych. No saldré sin verle porque se trata de un asunto muy importante.» Quisimos despacharle, como hicimos con aquella mujer. «Vasili Fedótych no está...» Pero el cojo respondió: «Pues no voy a moverme de aquí aunque se me haga de noche.» Puede verle por la ventana... Quizá le conozca.

Marianna siguió a Tatiana hasta el pasillo y, cuando pasó cerca de Nezhdánov, de nuevo observó su frente fruncida y volvió a secársela con el pañuelo. A través del cristal sucio avistó al visitante de quién Tatiana le acababa de hablar. No le conocía. Pero en aquel momento, desde un rincón de la casa, apareció Solomin ante el visitante.

El pequeño jorobado se le dirigió rápidamente y le tendió la mano. Ambos desaparecieron.

Enseguida se oyeron sus pasos por la escalera. Se dirigían hacia donde estaba Marianna, que volvió rápidamente a su habitación y se quedó de pie, respirando con dificultad. Estaba aterrorizada... ¿De qué? Ni ella misma lo sabía.

La cabeza de Solomin apareció por la puerta. -Marianna Vikéntievna, ¿puedo entrar? Traigo conmigo a una persona que necesita hablarle.

Marianna sólo bajó la cabeza como respuesta. Y tras Solomin entró... Paklin.

XXXIII

Soy amigo de su marido -dijo Paklin haciendo una gran reverencia a Marianna, como deseoso de esconderle su rostro aterrorizado-. Soy también amigo de Vasili Fedótych. Alexéi Dmítrich está durmiendo y me dijeron que está enfermo y yo, desgraciadamente, soy portador de malas noticias, que ya he tenido la oportunidad de contar en parte a Vasili Fedótych... y ante las cuales será necesario tomar algunas medidas decisivas.

La voz de Paklin disminuía a medida que hablaba, como si estuviera torturado por la sed. Las noticias que traía eran realmente muy malas. Markélov había sido cogido por los campesinos y llevado a la ciudad. El chupatintas estúpido había denunciado a Golushkin, el cual había sido detenido. Éste, a su vez, estaba denunciándolo todo y a todos, y quería convertirse a la Iglesia Ortodoxa, había ofrecido a la escuela un retrato del metropolitano Filarét y había dado ya cinco mil rublos para que fueran distribuidos entre los "soldados mutilados". No había la mínima duda de que había denunciado a Nezhdánov; la policía podía asaltar la fábrica en cualquier momento. Vasili Fedótych también estaba en peligro.

Comentario [Librodot-153]: Metropolitano de Moscú, extremadamente reaccionario, que hasta el último momento se opuso a la abolición del azote y de la servidumbre. Era autor de un *Catecismo de la fe ortodoxa,* que se enseñaba en las escuelas.

-Por lo que a mí respecta -añadió Paklin-, estoy admirado de estar todavía en libertad, aunque en realidad nunca me he ocupado de la política ni he participado en ningún plan. Me aproveché de esta ventaja o de este descuido de la policía para avisarles e intentar hacer algo... para evitar algo desagradable.

Marianna escuchó a Paklin hasta el final. No tenía miedo, se sentía incluso muy tranquila... Pero era realmente necesario hacer algo. Su primer movimiento fue mirar a Solomin.

Éste también parecía tranquilo. Sólo alrededor de sus labios los músculos le temblaban un poco... y no era su sonrisa habitual.

Solomin comprendió el significado de la mirada de Marianna: esperaba que él decidiera lo que se debía hacer.

-La situación es realmente muy delicada -empezó él-. No seria malo que Nezhdánov desapareciera durante algún tiempo. A propósito, ¿cómo supo que él estaba aquí, señor Paklin?

Paklin hizo un gesto con la mano.

-Me lo dijo una persona. Lo vio cuando hablaba por el vecindario y le siguió, aunque sin malas intenciones pues es un simpatizante. Perdóneme -añadió, dirigiéndose a Marianna-,

pero la verdad es que nuestro amigo Nezhdánov fue muy... muy negligente.

-De nada sirve echarle ahora las culpas -dijo de nuevo Solomin-. Lástima que no podamos discutirlo con él, pues no estará en condiciones hasta mañana. Sin embargo, la policía no es tan rápida como imagina. Tendrá que desaparecer con él, Marianna Vikéntievna.

-Claro -respondió Marianna, conmovida pero firme.

-¡Sí! -dijo Solomin-. Hay que pensar, hay que decidir dónde irán...

-Permitan que les sugiera una idea -empezó Paklin-, una idea que me pasó por la cabeza cuando venía hacia aquí. Y debo decirles que dejé el carruaje a una versta de aquí.

-¿Qué idea es esa? -preguntó Solomin.

-Déme caballos... y yo voy al galope a casa de los Sipiaguin.

-¿A casa de los Sipiaguin? -exclamó Marianna-. ¿Para qué?

-Verá.

-¿Los conoce?

-No. Pero óiganme. Entiendan bien mi propuesta. A mí me parece simplemente genial. Markélov es cuñado de Sipiaguin, hermano de su mujer. ¿Verdad? Ese barin ¿no haría nada para intentar salvarle? Y en cuanto a Nezhdánov, aunque Sipiaguin esté furioso con él... asimismo es pariente suyo, por haberse casado con usted. Y el peligro que corre la cabeza de nuestro amigo...

-No estoy casada -observó Marianna.

Paklin se estremeció.

-¿Cómo? ¿Aún no tuvieron tiempo? Bien, no tiene importancia -añadió-, pueden fingir que sí lo están, y casarse después. No me parece que se pueda hacer otra cosa. Preste atención al hecho de que hasta ahora Sipiaguin no se decidió a perseguirla. Esto prueba que hay en él una cierta... generosidad. Veo que no le gusta esta expresión... digamos entonces: un cierto orgullo. ¿Por qué no habríamos de servimos de eso? ¡Piénselo!

Marianna levantó la cabeza y se pasó la mano por el pelo.

-Puede servirse de lo que quiera en favor de Markélov, señor Paklin... o de usted mismo, pero yo y Alexéi no queremos ni la intercesión ni la protección del señor Sipiaguin. No salimos de su casa para ir ahora a suplicar a su puerta como mendigos. La generosidad o el orgullo del señor Sipiaguin o de su esposa no tiene nada que ver con nosotros.

Son sentimientos extremadamente dignos -respondió Paklin (pero pensó: «¡Vean bien qué pequeño te hacen!»)-, aunque, por otro lado, si lo piensa bien... De todas formas, estoy dispuesto a obedecer. Voy a interceder por Markélov, por nuestro buen Markélov. Debo observar sólo que él no es pariente consanguíneo, sino por su mujer... mientras que usted...

-Señor Paklin, ¡por favor!

-¡De acuerdo... de acuerdo... de acuerdo! Pero no puedo dejar de expresar mi pena, porque Sipiaguin es un hombre muy influyente.

¿Y no teme por usted? -preguntó Solomin. Paklin levantó el pecho.

¡En momentos como este no podemos pensar en nosotros mismos! -dijo con orgullo. Y estaba precisamente pensando sólo en sí mismo. Lo que quería (¡pobre y débil como era!) era largarse. En gratitud por el servicio prestado, quizá Sipiaguin dijera, si fuese necesario, una palabra en favor suyo. Porque también él -¡dijera lo que dijera!- estaba implicado, había escuchado... e incluso había hablado bastante.

-Creo que su idea no es mala -dijo finalmente Solomin-, aunque haya pocas esperanzas de éxito. De cualquier manera, se puede intentar. Perder no se pierde nada.

-Claro que no. Aunque pase lo peor, o sea, que me retuerzan el cuello... ¿Qué importancia tiene?

-No tendrá mucha importancia... -*«Merci.,* pensó Paklin. Pero Solomin continuó-: ¿Qué hora es? Las cinco. No podemos perder tiempo. Tendrá los caballos enseguida. ¡Pável!

Pero en lugar de Pável apareció Nezhdánov en la puerta de la habitación. Se tambaleaba sobre las piernas, se apoyaba con una mano en la puerta y, con la boca ligeramente abierta, miraba vagamente. No comprendía nada.

Paklin fue el primero que se acercó a él.

¡Aliosha! -exclamó-. ¿Me conoces?

Nezhdánov le miró parpadeando lentamente.

-¿Paklin? dijo finalmente.

-Soy yo, sí, sí. ¿Estás enfermo?

Sí... estoy enfermo. Pero... ¿qué haces aquí?

-¿Yo?... -pero en ese momento Marianna tocó disimuladamente con el codo a Paklin. Este se giró y vio que ella le hacía señales-. Ah, sí -dijo-. Sí... ¡exactamente! Imagina, Aliosha -añadió en voz alta-, he venido a tratar de un asunto importante y tengo que marcharme en seguida... Solomin te lo explica después, y Marianna... Marianna Vikéntievna. Ambos están al corriente de mis intenciones. Nos interesa a todos o sea, no, no -corrigió en respuesta a las miradas y gestos de Marianna-, interesa a Markélov, a nuestro común amigo Markélov, y a nadie más que a él. Pero ahora, ¡adiós! Todos los minutos son importantes, amigo... Volveremos a vernos. Vasili Fedótych, ¿quiere tener la bondad de venir conmigo para dar órdenes sobre los caballos?

Ciertamente. Marianna, quería decirle que fuera firme, pero veo que no hace falta -dijo Solomin.

-¡Oh, sí! ¡Oh, sí! -exclamó Paklin-. Es como una romana del tiempo de Catón. De Catón de Utica. Vamos, entonces, Vasili Fedótych, ¡vamos!

-Hay tiempo -dijo Solomin a través de una leve sonrisa.

Nezhdánov se apartó un poco para dejarlos pasar...pero en sus ojos se leía una gran confusión. Después dio dos pasos y se sentó silenciosamente en la silla, delante de Marianna.

-Alexéi -dijo ella-, lo descubrieron todo. Los campesinos detuvieron a Markélov, los campesinos a quien él intentaba levantar. Está preso en la ciudad, igual que aquel comerciante con quien almorzaste. Y es probable que pronto la policía venga aquí. Y Paklin fue a hablar con Sipiaguin.

¿Para qué? -preguntó Nezhdánov de una manera casi inaudible. Pero sus ojos brillaron y su rostro retomó su expresión habitual. La borrachera le pasó instantáneamente.

-A ver si él intercede...

Nezhdánov se enderezó.

-¿Por nosotros?

-No. Por Markélov. Quería pedir también por nosotros... pero yo no lo permití. ¿Hice bien, Alexéi?

-¿Si hiciste bien? -preguntó Nezhdánov. Y sin levantarse de la silla, extendió los brazos-. ¿Si hiciste bien? -repitió y, atrayéndola hacia sí y apretando el rostro contra su cintura, empezó súbitamente a llorar.

¿Qué tienes? ¿Qué tienes? -exclamó Marianna. Como cuando la otra vez en que él había caído de rodillas delante de ella temblando y sin aliento en un súbito torrente de pasión, ella puso las manos sobre su cabeza vacilante. Pero lo que *ella* ahora sentía era diferente de la otra vez. Entonces se habría entregado a él, se le habría sometido y sólo esperaba una palabra suya. Ahora sentía lástima de él y sólo pensaba en la manera de tranquilizarle.

-¿Qué tienes? -repitió ella-. ¿Por qué lloras? No será porque has vuelto a casa un poco... un poco incomodado. ¡No puede ser! ¿O quizá sea porque Markélov te da lástima? ¿O temes por mí? ¿O por ti? ¿O es que lamentas nuestras esperanzas? ¡Pero seguro que no esperabas que todo marchara bien!

Nezhdánov levantó de pronto la cabeza.

-No, Marianna -dijo él, dominando los sollozos-.

No tengo miedo por ti o por mí, pero... siento lástima...

-¿De quién?

-De ti, Marianna. De que hayas unido tu destino al de un hombre que no lo merece.

-¿Por qué no?

¡Aunque sea porque es un hombre que llora en un momento como este!

-No eres tú quien llora, sino tus nervios.

-Mis nervios y yo son la misma persona. Escucha, Marianna, mírame a los ojos:

Librodot

¿puedes decirme en este momento que no estás arrepentida?

¿De qué?

-De haber huido conmigo.

-¡No!

-¿E irás conmigo? ¿A cualquier parte?

¡Sí!

-¿Sí? Marianna... ¿sí?

-Sí. Te di mi palabra, y mientras seas el hombre que yo amo... no la retiraré.

Nezhdánov siguió sentado. Marianna estaba de pie delante de él. Los brazos de él la envolvían por la cintura; las manos de ella reposaban en sus hombros.

«Por lo menos», pensaba Nezhdánov, «antes, cuando la cogía así, su cuerpo se quedaba inmóvil, pero ahora siento que quizá involuntariamente, se aparta de mí.» Soltó a Marianna... y realmente ésta retrocedió un poco.

-De acuerdo -dijo él en voz alta-. Si tenemos que huir de aquí... antes de que la policía nos encuentre... creo que no sería mala idea que nos casáramos. En otro sitio quizá no encontremos un cura tan complaciente como el reverendo Zósimo.

-Yo estoy lista -dijo Marianna.

Nezhdánov la miró fijamente.

¡Una romana! -exclamó él con una sonrisa sarcástica-. ¡El sentimiento del deber!

Marianna se encogió de hombros.

-Tenemos que decírselo a Solomin.

-Sí... Solomin... -murmuró Nezhdánov-. Pero él también corre peligro. La policía le detendrá también. Me parece que él también tomó parte y sabe aún más que yo.

No sé nada -respondió Marianna-. El nunca habla de sí mismo.

«¡No es como yo!», pensó Nezhdánov. «Era eso lo que ella quería decir.»

¡Solomin... Solomin! -añadió después de un largo silencio-. ¿Sabes?, Marianna, yo no lamentaría si unieras para siempre tu vida a un hombre así, como Solomin... o con él mismo.

Marianna miró a Nezhdánov fijamente.

-No tienes ningún derecho a decirme esto -murmuró ella finalmente.

-¿No tengo ningún derecho? ¿En qué sentido debo entender esas palabras? ¿Significan que tú *me* amas, o que no debo, de una manera general, hablar de esas cosas?

-No tienes ningún derecho -repitió Marianna. Nezhdánov bajó la cabeza.

¡Marianna! -exclamó, en un tono de voz ligeramente diferente.

-¿Qué?

-Si yo ahora... si te pidiera ahora, ya sabes... Pero no, no te pido nada... adiós.

Se levantó y salió. Marianna no le detuvo. Nezhdánov se sentó en el diván y se tapó la cara con las manos. Tenía miedo de sus propios pensamientos e intentaba no pensar. Sentía una especie de mano oscura, subterránea, que le cogía en las propias raíces de su ser, y que ya no le dejaba. Sabía que aquel ser querido, amado, que estaba en la habitación de al lado no vendría a su encuentro, y él tampoco tendría coraje de ir hacia ella. ¿Para qué? ¿Qué podría decirle?

Unos pasos rápidos, firmes, le hicieron abrir los ojos. Solomin cruzó la habitación y, llamando a la puerta de Marianna, entró.

Por lo menos, el honor -murmuró amargamente Nezhdánov.

XXXV

ERAN ya las diez de la noche y en la sala de visitas de Arzhánov estaban sentados Sipiaguin, su esposa, y Kaloméitsev, jugando a las cartas, cuando un criado entró y anunció que un desconocido, un tal señor Paklin, deseaba hablar con Borís Andreích sobre un asunto

muy importante y urgente.

-¡Tan tarde! -se sorprendió Valentina Mijáilovna.

-¿Cómo? -preguntó Boris Andreích rascándose su bella nariz-. ¿Cómo dijiste que se llamaba ese señor?

-Paklin, señor.

-¡Paklin! -éxclamó Kaloméitsev-. Un nombre verdaderamente campestre. Paklin... Solomin... *De vrais noms ruraux, hein?*

-¿Y dices -continuó Borís Andreích dirigiéndose con la nariz arrugada al criado-, que se trata de un asunto importante y urgente?

-Así lo dijo.

-Hm... Un mendigo cualquiera, o un intrigante. -O ambas cosas al mismo tiempo -intervino Kaloméitsev.

-Muy probablemente. Bien, que entre a mi despacho -Borís Andreích se levantó-. *Pardon, ma bonne*. Entretanto, pueden jugar un poco al écarté. O espérenme... no tardo nada.

-Nous causerons... allez' -dijo Kaloméitsev.

Cuando Sipiaguin entró en el despacho y vio la miserable, frágil figura de Paklin, apoyada humildemente en la pared entre la chimenea y la puerta, fue dominado

«¡Dios mío! ¡Qué infeliz!», pensó. «Y además, ¡parece que es cojo!»

Siéntese -dijo en voz alta, utilizando sus notas barítonas más benévolas, echando la cabeza hacia atrás y sentándose antes que la visita-. Debe estar cansado del viaje. ¡Siéntese y explíqueme qué asunto importante es ese que le trajo a mi casa a esta hora!

-Me he tomado la libertad -empezó Paklin dejándose caer cuidadosamente en la silla-, de venir a casa de Su Excelencia...

Un momento, un momento -le interrumpió Sipiaguin-. Tengo la impresión de que no es la primera vez que nos vemos. Yo nunca olvido una cara que haya encontrado ya, pero... a... a... a... realmente... ¿dónde le he visto ya?

Su Excelencia no está equivocada. Tuve el honor de encontrarme con usted en San Petersburgo en casa de una persona... que después de eso... desgraciadamente... fue merecedor de su indignación.

Sipiaguin saltó de la silla.

-¡En casa del señor Nezhdánov! Ya me acuerdo. Espero que no vendrá de su parte, ¿verdad?

En modo alguno, Excelentísimo Señor, por el contrario... yo...

Sipiaguin se sentó de nuevo.

-Y hace bien. Porque le diría que saliera inmediatamente de esta casa. No puedo permitir cualquier mediador entre mí y el señor Nezhdánov. El señor Nezhdánov me insultó de tal forma que jamás podré olvidar... Yo estoy por encima de venganzas, pero no quiero saber nada de él, ni de esa muchacha... de todas maneras más corrupta de mente que de corazón -(Sipiaguin ya había repetido esta frase por lo menos treinta veces desde la huida de Marianna)-, que decidió abandonar la casa que la había abrigado para ser amante de un aventurero sin nombre. Deben darse por satisfechos de que los olvide. Mientras decía la última palabra, Sipiaguin agitó el puño en el aire por encima de la cabeza.

-¡Los he olvidado, querido señor!

-Ya he dicho a Su Excelencia que no he venido de parte de ellos en particular, aunque pueda informar a Su Excelencia de que ya están legalmente casados...

«¡Ya está!», pensó Paklin. «Dije que mentiría... y ya está. ¡Qué importa!»

Sipiaguin, apoyándose en el respaldo de la silla movía el cuello de izquierda a derecha.

-Eso no me interesa absolutamente nada, apreciado señor. Es sólo una boda estúpida más en el mundo y nada más. Pero ¿qué asunto urgente es ese al que debo el placer de su visita?

«¡Ah, maldito director general!», pensó de nuevo Paklin. «¡Pronto pondrás una cara diferente!»

-El hermano de su esposa -dijo él en voz alta-, el señor Markélov, fue capturado por los mujiks que él incitaba a la revuelta y se encuentra en este momento en casa del gobernador.

Comentario [Librodot-154]: El apellido Paklin está relacionado con *paklía* (estopa), Solomin con *soloma* (paja).

Comentario [Librodot-155]: Auténticos nombres rurales, ¿eh?

Comentario [Librodot-156]: ¡Perdón, querida!

Comentario [Librodot-157]: Conversaremos... ¡no se preocupe!por aquella sensación verdaderamente ministerial de superior compasión y condescendencia fastidiosa tan característica de los burócratas de San Petersburgo.

Librodot

Sipiaguin saltó de la silla por segunda vez.

-¿Qué? ¿Qué dice? -tartamudeó, no en su tono barítono, ministerial, sino de una manera gutural muy poco digna.

-He dicho que su cuñado fue detenido y está en chirona. Y yo, en seguida que lo supe, cogí unos caballos y vine a avisarle. Pensé que podría prestarle un servicio, a usted y a ese infeliz, que quizá Su Excelencia pueda salvar.

-Le estoy muy agradecido -dijo Sipiaguin con la misma voz débil y, pulsando un timbre que parecía un hongo, llenó toda la casa de un sonido metálico-. Le estoy muy agradecido -repitió, ya más duro-, pero debo decirle que un hombre que se atreve a pisotear todas las leyes de Dios y de los hombres, aunque fuera cien veces mi pariente, a mis ojos no es un infeliz, sino un criminal

Un criado entró en el despacho.

Sus órdenes?

-¡El carruaje! Quiero en seguida el carruaje con cuatro caballos! Voy a la ciudad. ¡Que Filipp y Stepán me acompañen! -el criado desapareció-. Sí, señor, mi cuñado es un criminal. Voy a la ciudad, pero no para salvarle. ¡Oh, no!

Pero, Excelentísimo Señor...

Son así mis principios, querido señor, y ¡le pido que no me moleste con sus objeciones!

Sipiaguin empezó a caminar de un lado para otro en el despacho, mientras Paklin le miraba con los ojos muy abiertos.

«¡Qué monstruo!», pensó. «Por el habla pareces un liberal, pero ¡no pasas de ser un león hambriento!»

La puerta se abrió y, con pasos apresurados, entraron, primero Valentina Mijáilovna y, tras ella, Kaloméitsev.

Qué pasa, Boris? ¿Has dado la orden para preparar el carruaje? ¿Vas a la ciudad? ¿Qué ocurre?

Sipiaguin se acercó a la mujer y le cogió el brazo derecho.

Il faut vous armer de courage... ma chére! Tu hermano ha sido arrestado.

Comentario [Librodot-158]: Es necesario armarse de coraje, querida.

-¿Mi hermano? ¿Seriozha? ¿Por qué?

¡Predicaba las doctrinas socialistas a los mujiks! -Kaloméitsev soltó un pequeño grito-. ¡Sí! ¡Les predicaba la revolución, hacía propaganda! Pero ellos mismos le cogieron y le entregaron a la policía. Ahora está en la cárcel... en la ciudad.

¡Qué loco! ¿Quién te lo contó?

-Este señor... el señor... ¿cómo se llama?

Valentina Mijáilovna miró a Paklin. Éste hizo una leve reverencia. «¡Qué mujer deslumbrante!», pensó. ¡Incluso en un momento tan difícil, Paklin era susceptible a la belleza femenina!

¿Y quieres ir a la ciudad... tan tarde?

-El gobernador debe estar todavía levantado.

-Yo siempre pensé que se acabaría así -exclamó Kaloméitsev-. No podía ser de otro modo. Pero ¡qué honrados son nuestros mujiks! ¡Bravo! *Pardon, madame, c'est votre frére! Mais la vérité avant tout!*

Comentario [Librodot-159]: Perdón, señora, ¡es hermano suyo! Pero ¡la verdad por encima de todo!

-¿Quieres realmente ir a la ciudad, Boria? -preguntó Valentina Mijáilovna.

Comentario [Librodot-160]: Boria es un diminutivo de Borís.

-Estoy seguro -continuó Kaloméitsev-, de que ese, ese *profesor,* el señor Nezhdánov, está también metido en esto. *J'en mettrai ma main au feu.* ¡Todos son de la misma banda! ¿Sabe si también le detuvieron? ¿No lo sabe?

Comentario [Librodot-161]: Pondría la mano en el fuego.

Sipiaguin agitó de nuevo la muñeca.

¡No lo sé, ni quiero saberlo! A propósito -añadió, dirigiéndose a la mujer-, *il parait qu'ils se sont mariés.*

Comentario [Librodot-162]: Parece que se casaron.

-¿Quién te lo dijo? ¿También este señor?

Valentina Mijáilovna miró de nuevo a Paklin, pero esta vez con los ojos semicerrados.

Sí, fue él.

En ese caso -intervino Kaloméitsev-, él sin duda sabe donde están. ¿Sabe dónde están?

Librodot

¿Lo sabe? ¿Eh? ¿Lo sabe? -Kaloméitsev empezó a caminar de un lado a otro delante de Paklin, como si quisiera cortarle el camino, aunque éste no diera ninguna señal de querer huir-. ¡Hable! ¡Responda! ¿Eh? ¿Eh? ¿Lo sabe? ¿Lo sabe? ¿Lo sabe?

-Aunque lo supiera -exclamó, furioso, Paklin, cuya rabia había finalmente explotado, con los ojos centelleando-, aunque lo supiera, no se lo diría.

-Oh... oh... oh... -murmuró Kaloméitsev-. Vean esto... ¡Vean esto! Éste también, ¡éste también debe de ser de la banda!

¡El carruaje está preparado! -anunció, en voz alta, el criado.

Sipiaguin cogió el sombrero con un gesto elegante, pero Valentina Mijáilovna insistió tanto en que aplazara el viaje hasta el día siguiente, aduciendo argumentos tan convincentes que estaba muy oscuro, que todos estarían ya durmiendo en la ciudad, que sólo se destrozaría los nervios, que podía resfriarse-, que Sipiaguin finalmente cedió.

-¡Obedezco! -exclamó. Y, con un gesto casi tan elegante como antes, lanzó el sombrero sobre la silla.

-¡Ya no es necesario el carruaje! -dijo al criado-. Pero que esté listo mañana a las seis en punto! ¿Oyes? Puedes irte. ¡Espera! El equipaje del señor... ¡este señor se queda! ¡Paguen al cochero! ¿Ah? ¿Quiere decir algo, señor Konopatin? Le llevo conmigo mañana, señor Konopatin. ¿Qué dice? No oigo... ¿Quiere vodka? ¡Que traigan vodka para el señor Konopatin! ¿No? ¿No bebe? En ese caso... ¡Fiódor! ¡Acompáñele a la habitación verde! Buenas noches, señor Kono...

Paklin perdió, finalmente, la paciencia.

¡Paklin! -gritó-. ¡Mi nombre es Paklin!

Sí... ¡sí! Bien, no tiene importancia. Son parecidos, ¿sabe? ¡Qué voz tan fuerte la suya para un cuerpo tan pequeño! Hasta mañana, señor... Paklin... Esta vez no me equivoqué, ¿verdad? *Siméon, vous viendrez avec nous?*

-Je crois bien!

Y Paklin fue llevado a la habitación verde. Cuando se metió en la cama sintió que giraban la llave en la cerradura inglesa. Se censuró por su idea "genial" y apenas pudo pegar ojo.

A la mañana siguiente, muy temprano, a las cinco y media, fueron a despertarle. Le sirvieron café y, mientras lo tomaba, un criado con cordones de color en los hombros esperaba con una bandeja en la mano y apoyando una de sus piernas en la otra.

-¡Dése prisa! ¡Los señores le esperan!

Después le acompañaron abajo. Efectivamente el carruaje ya esperaba. El de Kaloméitsev estaba allí también. Sipiaguin apareció por la puerta con un abrigo de piel de camello de cuello redondo. Aquellos abrigos habían pasado de moda y sólo los usaba un cierto dignatario importante, que Sipiaguin intentaba adular e imitar. En las grandes ocasiones y en las oficiales, vestía siempre aquel abrigo.

Sipiaguin saludó a Paklin con bastante afabilidad y, con un movimiento enérgico de la mano, le indicó el carruaje y le pidió que tomara asiento.

-Señor Paklin, vendrá con nosotros, ¡señor Paklin! Pongan el saco del señor Paklin junto al cochero. ¡Yo llevo al señor Paklin! -dijo Sipiaguin, dando énfasis a la palabra *Paklin y a* la letra *a-.* Tienes un nombre de mil diablos y ¿aún te ofendes cuando las personas se equivocan? Pues, ya que lo tienes, ¡llenate con él! ¡Señor Paklin! ¡Paklin! -retumbó sonoro aquel desafortunado nombre en el aire fresco de la mañana.

Hacía tanto frío que Kaloméitsev, que había salido después de Sipiaguin, exclamó varias veces, en francés: *-Brrr! Brrr! Brr*

Y envolviéndose más en el abrigo, se sentó en su elegante carruaje con la capota bajada. (Si su pobre amigo, el príncipe servio Mijaíl Obrénovich, le hubiera visto, seguramente habría comprado uno igual en Binder...

»Vous savez, Binder, le grand carrossier des Champs

Elysées?»)

Valentina Mijáilovna, aún "en toca y camisón", observaba por las persianas

Comentario [Librodot-163]: Este apellido está relacionado com *konopatit'* (calafatear), tal como Paklin está relacionado con *paklia* (estopa).

Comentario [Librodot-164]: ¿Vendrá con nosotros, Simeón?

Comentario [Librodot-165]: Sí, por cierto.

Comentario [Librodot-166]: Binder, el gran fabricante de carruajes de los Campos Elíseos, ¿sabe?

Comentario [Librodot-167]: Citación del poema de Pushkin *El conde Nulin* [«Graf Nulin»].

Librodot

entreabiertas de la habitación. Sipiaguin se sentó y le dijo adiós.

¿Está confortable, señor Paklin? ¡Pues vamos!

-Je vous recommande mon frére! Épargnezle -oyeron que decía la voz de Valentina Mijáilovna.

-Soyez tranquilla! -exclamó Kaloméitsev mirándola rápidamente por debajo de la visera del gorro de viaje hecho según diseño especial suyo, con una escara

pela-. *C'est surtout l'autre qu'il faut* pincer!

-¡Vamos! -repitió Sipiaguin-. Señor Paklin, ¿no tiene frío? ¡Pues vamos!

Los dos carruajes partieron.

Durante los primeros diez minutos, ni Sipiaguin ni Paklin se hablaron. El infeliz Sílushka, en su abrigo simple y con el sombrero de alas anchas, parecía aún más insignificante contra el forro oscuro de seda del carruaje. Iba callado, mirando los estores azules que se levantaban rápidamente al simple toque de un botón, el tapiz de piel de carnero a los pies, la caja de caoba enfrente, con una escribanía móvil para cartas y hasta un estante para libros (Boris Andreích nunca lo usaba, pero quería que la gente pensara que él, como Thiers, trabajaba durante los viajes). Paklin se sentía intimidado. Sipiaguin le miró una o dos veces de reojo por encima de su cara bien afeitada y, con una pomposa deliberación, sacó de su bolsillo una cigarrera de plata con un monograma en forma de sortija y una cinta eslava, y ofreció... realmente ofreció a su compañero de viaje un puro, que sostenía entre los dedos índice y el mayor de su mano elegantemente vestida con un guante inglés amarillo de piel de perro.

-No fumo -murmuró Paklin.

-¡Ah! -respondió Sipiaguin. Pero él sí empezó a fumar un puro, una excelente regalía.

-Debo decirle... querido señor Paklin -comentó Sipiaguin soplando delicadamente y expulsando tenues anillos de delicioso humo-, que yo... realmente... le estoy muy... agradecido... Puede que le hubiera parecido... anoche... un poco severo... pero no es mi... carácter... -Sipiaguin, intencionadamente, vacilaba al hablar-. Se lo puedo asegurar. Pero, señor Paklin, póngase en mi... lugar -Sipiaguin cambió el puro de un lado de la boca al otro-. La posición que ocupo me coloca... por decirlo de alguna manera... en la evidencia... Y de repente... el hermano de mi mujer... se compromete... y me compromete a mí, de esta manera tan insólita. ¡Ah, señor Paklin! ¿Piensa quizá que no tiene importancia?

-Sepa Su Excelencia que yo no pienso nada.

-¿No sabe, acaso, por qué le detuvieron... y dónde?

-Oí decir que fue en el distrito de T.

-¿Quién le dijo eso?

-Un... una persona.

-Sin duda no fue un pajarito. Pero ¿quién es esa persona?

-Fue... un asistente del director de la secretaría del gobernador...

-¿Cómo se llama?

-¿El director?

No, el asistente.

-Se llama... se llama Uliáshevich. Sepa Su Excelencia que es una persona muy honesta. Y yo, en seguida que supe lo que había sucedido, corrí a casa de Su Excelencia.

-¡Sí, sí! Y yo repito que le estoy muy agradecido. Pero ¡qué locura! ¿No le parece que es una locura, señor Paklin? ¿No le parece? ¿Eh?

¡Una auténtica locura! -exclamó Paklin, sintiendo que un sudor caliente se le escurría por la espalda-. Quiere decir -continuó él-, que no comprenden al mujik ruso -Paklin miró a Sipiaguin que se volvió ligeramente hacia él y le observó con una mirada fría, pero no exenta de animosidad-. El mujik ruso nunca podrá ser instigado a la revuelta si no es apelando a su devoción por la autoridad, por un zar cualquiera. Es necesario inventar una leyenda... recuerde al falso Dmitri... es necesario mostrarle una enseña marcada al fuego en el pecho.

-Sí, sí, o como Pugachóv -interrumpió Sipiaguin como si dijera: «Aún no he olvidado nuestra historia... no hace falta que continúe.» Y después de añadir: «¡Una locura! ¡Una locura!», se dejó caer en la contemplación de los rápidos anillos de humo que salían de su

Comentario [Librodot-168]: ¡Le encomiendo mi hermano. ¡Cuide de él!

Comentario [Librodot-169]: ¡Quede tranquila!

Comentario [Librodot-170]: ¡Es sobre todo al otro al que hay que atrapar!

Comentario [Librodot-171]: Antiguo siervo que se presentó en 1603 como el zarévich y, con el apoyo de un grupo de aventureros polacos y cosacos, se proclamó heredero legítimo del trono ruso. Entró en Moscú en 1605 y fue coronado en la catedral de Uspenski. Finalmente, en 1606, fue asesinado. Este tipo de táctica fue adoptada por los populistas. En 1875 Y.V. Stefánovich empezó a propagar entre los campesinos del distrito de Chiguirinski, provincia de Kíev, que el mismo zar había escrito un *Documento oficial secreto,* en el cual los campesinos eran llamados a masacrar a los propietarios que «por la astucia y el engaño» se habían apoderado «de la mejor y mayor parte de la tierra». Stefánovich consiguió organizar un «destacamento secreto» de campesinos, pero la conspiración fue descubierta y los campesinos fueron severamente castigados.

Comentario [Librodot-172]: Famoso pretendiente al trono, durante el reinado de Catalina II, comandando un ejército de campesinos, siervos y habitantes del Volga, incluyendo tártaros, bashkires, calmucos y kirguises. Pugachov llegó a comandar entre veinte y treinta mil hombres. Conquistó Kazan y cuando parecía que nadie podía ya detenerle, fue traicionado, llevado a Moscú en una jaula y ejecutado. Es el tema de la novela de Pushkin *la hija del capitán (Kapitánskaia docbka].*

Librodot

puro.

-Excelentísimo Señor! -observó atrevidamente Paklin-. Le dije hace poco que no fumo... pero no es cierto. Fumo, sí, y su puro huele tan bien...

-¡Ah! ¿Qué? ¿Qué? -preguntó Sipiaguin, como si despertara. Y, sin que Paklin tuviera que repetirlo, prueba evidente de que le había oído bien y que sólo soltaba sus exclamaciones para darse aires, le extendió la cigarrera.

Paklin empezó a fumar, muy agradecido.

«Esta es una buena oportunidad», pensó éste. Pero Sipiaguin se le anticipó.

-Recuerdo que me dijo también -dijo éste en un tono despreocupado, interrumpiéndose para mirar el puro y empujar el sombrero hacia la frente-, que me dijo... ¿Ah!, sí..., que me habló de su amigo, que se casó con mi... pariente. ¿Estuvo con ellos? ¿Están muy lejos de aquí?

«¡Ehe!», pensó Paklin. «¡Cuidado, Sila!»

-Sepa Su Excelencia que ¡sólo les vi una vez! En realidad viven... no muy lejos de aquí.

-Como usted comprenderá -continuó Sipiaguin en el mismo tono-, yo no puedo preocuparme seriamente, como ya le expliqué... ni por esa muchacha frívola, ni por su amigo. ¡Dios mío! Yo no tengo prejuicios, pero ¡convendrá conmigo que es demasiado! ¡Qué estupidez! Sin embargo, supongo que se sintieron atraídos más por la política... ¡Política! -repitió encogiéndose de hombros-, que por cualquier otro sentimiento.

-También a mí me lo parece, Excelentísimo Señor.

-Sí, el señor Nezhdánov era muy revolucionario. Pero tenemos que hacerle justicia: nunca escondió sus opiniones.

-Nezhdánov -arriesgó Paklin- fue quizá demasiado lejos, pero su corazón...

-Es bueno -terminó Sipiaguin-, claro... claro... como el de Markélov. Todos tienen buen corazón. Probablemente él también tomó parte en esto y estará implicado... ¡Supongo que tendré que interceder también por él!

Paklin apretó las manos contra su pecho.

-Sí, sí, sí, Excelentísimo Señor. ¡Extiéndale su protección. El merece... merece... su simpatía.

Sipiaguin suspiró.

-¿Le parece?

-Por lo menos, si no por él... por su sobrina, que ahora es su esposa! («¡Dios mío! ¡Dios mío!» pensó Paklin. «¡Qué manera de mentir la mía!»)

Sipiaguin entornó los ojos.

-Veo que es usted un amigo muy devoto. Es una buena cualidad, muy digna, mi joven amigo. ¿Dice entonces que viven muy cerca?

-Sí, Excelentísimo Señor, en un gran establecimiento...

Aquí Paklin se mordió la lengua.

-Claro, claro... ¡en casa de Solomin! ¡Están allí! Ya lo sabía, ya me habían informado... Sí. (Sipiaguin no lo sabía y nadie le había informado, pero recordando la visita de Solomin, el encuentro nocturno, tiró del anzuelo... y Paklin picó en seguida.)

-Ya que lo sabe... -empezó a decir y, por segunda vez Paklin se arrepintió. Pero ya era tarde. Una simple mirada que Sipiaguin le echó fue suficiente para comprender que había estado todo ese tiempo jugando con él como un gato con un ratón.

Sin embargo, Excelentísimo Señor -tartamudeó el infeliz-, debo decir que no sé absolutamente nada...

¡Pero yo no le hago preguntas! ¡Ya está bien! ¿Quién se cree que somos, yo y usted? -dijo Sipiaguin con arrogancia. Y se retiró hacia sus alturas ministeriales.

Y Paklin se sintió de nuevo una pequeña y miserable criatura. Hasta ese momento conservaba el puro en la boca, apartado de Sipiaguin, y aspiraba el humo lentamente, echándolo hacia un lado; pero lo sacó de la boca y dejó de fumar.

-¡Dios mío! -murmuró en voz baja, con el sudor caliente goteándole cada vez más por la espalda-. ¿Qué hice? Traicioné a todos... Fui engañado, ¡me han comprado con un puro! Soy un traidor... Y ¿qué podré hacer ahora para ayudarles? ¡Señor!

Librodot

Pero ya no había remedio. Sipiaguin se había dormido, dignamente, ministerialmente, envuelto en su imponente abrigo... Y un cuarto de hora después los dos carruajes se detuvieron delante de la casa del gobernador.

XXXV

EL gobernador de S. era uno de aquellos generales bonachones, joviales, de sociedad, de cuerpos blancos y limpios como sus almas; iguales, bien nacidos, bien cuidados y, para decirlo de algún modo, criados para que nunca fueran "pastores del pueblo" pero que, sin embargo, dan administradores muy aceptables, trabajando poco, siempre suspirando por San Petersburgo y siempre cortejando a las señoras de provincia. Algunos incluso consiguen ser útiles y dejar buenos recuerdos. El gobernador de S. acababa de levantarse y estaba cómodamente sentado en su tocador, en camisón y bata, mirándose al espejo y pasándose agua de colonia por la cara y el cuello, después de quitarse toda una colección de amuletos y monedas que llevaba colgadas, cuando le informaron de la llegada de Sipiaguin y Kaloméitsev, los cuales querían hablarle de un asunto importante y urgente. El gobernador conocía muy bien a Sipiaguin, incluso se tuteaban, eran amigos desde la infancia, y se encontraban a menudo en los salones de San Petersburgo, y en los últimos tiempos había empezado mentalmente a añadir a su nombre -siempre que le recordaba- la exclamación: «¡Ah!», como el nombre de un futuro hombre de estado. Conocía menos a Kaloméitsev y le respetaba menos a causa de varias quejas "desagradables" que había contra él. De todos modos le consideraba un hombre *qui fera son chemin* de una manera o de otra.

Comentario [Librodot-173]: Que triunfará.

Ordenó que los visitantes entrasen al despacho y fue apresuradamente a su encuentro con su bata de seda y, sin ni siquiera excusarse por recibirles vestido de una forma tan poco protocolaria, les apretó la mano cordialmente. Sin embargo, sólo Sipiaguin y Kaloméitsev estaban en el despacho; Paklin se había quedado en la sala de visitas. Al salir del carruaje había intentado escaparse, murmurando que tenía un asunto que tratar en casa, pero Sipiaguin le había detenido con educada firmeza (Kaloméitsev corrió y le murmuró al oído: ¿Ve *le lachez pas! Tonerre de tonerres!»* y se lo llevó con él. Sin embargo, no lo llevaron al despacho, pidiéndole –con la misma firmeza- que esperara en la sala de visitas hasta que le llamaran. Incluso allí, Paklin tenía la esperanza de poder huir... pero en la puerta apareció un policía, llamado por Kaloméitsev... y Paklin se quedó.

Comentario [Librodot-174]: ¡No deje que se escape, demonios!

-Seguro que ya sabes lo que me trae aquí, *Volde*mar! -empezó Sipiaguin.

-No, mi querido amigo, no tengo idea -respondió el amable epicúreo con una sonrisa de bienvenida en su rostro rosado y mostrando los dientes brillantes, medio ocultos por el bigote sedoso.

¿Cómo?... ¿Y Markélov?

-¿Qué pasa con Markélov? -repitió el gobernador con la misma expresión. En primer lugar, no recordaba que el preso del día anterior se llamara Markélov; en segundo lugar, se había olvidado completamente que la mujer de Sipiaguin tenía un hermano con ese nombre-. Pero, ¿por qué estás tú de pie, Boris? ¡Siéntate! ¿No quieres un poco de té?

Pero Sipiaguin no quería té.

Cuando finalmente entendió de lo que se trataba y por que razón Sipiaguin estaba allí con Kaloméitsev, el gobernador soltó una exclamación, se dio una palmada en la frente y su rostro asumió una expresión de pena.

-¡Sí... sí... sí! -repitió-. ¡Qué desgracia! Y él está aquí preso, de momento... Sabes que los presos *de esta clase* nunca están aquí más de una noche, pero como quiera que el jefe de la policía está fuera tu cuñado se quedó aquí... Pero mañana será enviado a la policía. Dios mío, ¡qué desagradable! ¿Qué crees que debo hacer?

-Me gustaría hablar con él aquí... si no va contra la ley.

-¡Por favor, querido amigo! Las leyes no se han hecho para personas como tú. Me siento muy molesto... *C'est affreux, tu* sais!

Comentario [Librodot-175]: ¡Es horrible!

Tocó el timbre de una manera especial. Apareció un ayudante.

-Mi querido barón, trate de esto -y le dijo lo que debía hacer. El barón desapareció-. Vaya, *mon cher* ami, los mujiks casi lo matan. Le ataron las manos detrás de la espalda, le echaron en un carro y ¡arre! E, ¡imagina!, ¡no estaba nada enfadado ni indignado con ellos! Parecía tan tranquilo... ¡Increíble! Pero tu mismo verás. *C'est un fanatique... tranquile*.

-*Ce sont des* pires -observó Kaloméitsev sentenciosamente.

El gobernador le miró de soslayo.

-A propósito, necesito hablarle, Simeón Petróvich. -¿Sobre qué?

-Sobre una cosa muy desagradable.

-¿De qué se trata?

-¿Recuerda aquel mujik que le debía dinero y que vino a quejarse...?

-Sí...

-Se ahorcó.

-¿Cuándo?

-Es lo de menos, pero es muy desagradable.

Kaloméitsev se encogió de hombros y se dirigió hacia la ventana con elegantes movimientos. En ese momento, el ayudante apareció con Markélov.

El gobernador había dicho la verdad: estaba extraordinariamente tranquilo. Incluso su habitual malhumor le había desaparecido del rostro y había sido sustituido por una expresión de cansancio indiferente, que no cambió al ver a su cuñado. Sólo en la mirada que echó al ayudante alemán que le había escoltado hubo un momentáneo resurgir del viejo odio que sentía por ayudantes y por alemanes. Tenía el chaleco rasgado por dos sitios y cosido apresuradamente con hilo grueso; en la frente, sobre las cejas y en la base de la nariz, presentaba algunas cicatrices cubiertas de sangre coagulada. No se había lavado, pero llevaba el pelo peinado. Con las manos escondidas en las mangas, se quedó cerca de la puerta. Respiraba con calma.

-¡Serguéi Mijáilovich! -exclamó Sipiaguin, excitado, dando un paso o dos en su dirección y alargando la mano derecha para que pudiese tocarle o detenerle en el caso de que hiciera algún movimiento hacia adelante-. ¡Serguéi Mijáilovich! No estoy aquí sólo para expresar nuestro asombro, nuestra profunda angustia... puedes estar seguro de eso. *¡Quisiste* perderte! ¡Y lo has conseguido! Quise verte para decirte... ah... para darte la posibilidad de escuchar la voz de la prudencia, del honor y de la amistad. Aún puedes suavizar tu destino y cree que, por *mi* parte, haré todo lo que pueda. El respetado gobernador es testigo de eso -aquí, Sipiaguin levantó la voz-. Un arrepentimiento sincero de tus errores y una confesión sincera, sin ninguna reserva, presentada a las autoridades competentes...

-Excelentísimo Señor -interrumpió Markélov, dirigiéndose al gobernador. Incluso el tono de su voz parecía tranquilo, aunque algo ronco-. Yo pensaba que quería verme para interrogarme de nuevo, que... Pero si me hizo venir sólo por un capricho del señor Sipiaguin, entonces, por favor, mande que me lleven de nuevo. Nunca llegaremos a entendernos. Todo lo que él dice es chino para mí.

-Chino... ¿eh? -gritó Kaloméitsev con insolencia-.

¿Instigar a los campesinos a la revuelta es chino? ¿Es chino, eh? ¿Eh? ¿Es chino?

-Su Excelencia tiene en su casa un funcionario de la policía secreta, ¿no? ¡Tan celoso! -exclamó Markélov, y una leve sonrisa de placer pasó por sus labios pálidos.

Kaloméitsev empezó a gritar y a patear. Pero el gobernador le hizo parar.

-La culpa es suya, Simeón Petróvich. ¿Por qué se mete en asuntos que no le conciernen?

-¿No me conciernen?... ¿No me conciernen?... Creo que este asunto es general... de todos nosotros, los aristócratas...

Markélov miró a Kaloméitsev lenta y fríamente, como si fuera la última vez, y se giró hacia Sipiaguin.

Y si quiere saber lo que pienso, cuñado, yo se le explicaré. Mire: admito que los campesinos tenían el derecho a detenerme y entregarme a la policía, si no les agradaba lo que yo les decía. Eran libres para hacerlo. *Yo* fui hacia ellos y no al contrario. Por lo que respecta

Comentario [Librodot-176]: Querido amigo.

Comentario [Librodot-177]: Es un fanático... tranquilo.

Comentario [Librodot-178]: Son los peores.

Librodot

al gobierno, si éste me envía a Siberia... no protestaré, aunque no me considere culpable. El gobierno hace su trabajo, se defiende. ¿Está satisfecho?

Sipiaguin levantó los brazos en señal de desesperación.

-¿Satisfecho? ¡Qué palabra! No es esa la cuestión... Nosotros no somos nadie para juzgar los actos del gobierno. Lo que yo quiero saber es si siente... si sientes, Serguéi -Sipiaguin decidió emplear un tono más cordial-, la imprudencia, el absurdo de tu empresa, si estás dispuesto a arrepentirte, si yo puedo responder por ti, Serguéi.

Markélov frunció sus espesas cejas.

Ya lo he dicho... y no quiero repetirlo.

-Pero ¿te arrepientes? ¿Te arrepientes?

De golpe, Markélov perdió la cabeza.

Ah, ¡déjeme en paz con su "te arrepientes"! ¿Quiere penetrar en mi propia alma? Por lo menos deje eso para mí solo.

Sipiaguin se encogió de hombros.

¡Siempre fuiste así, nunca quisiste escuchar la voz de la razón! Tienes la posibilidad de salir de aquí de una forma digna, honrada...

-Dignamente, honradamente... -repitió Markélov-. Ya conocemos esas palabras! Las usan siempre que se preparan para cualquier cosa abyecta. Es lo que significan esas palabras.

-Nosotros le compadecemos -Sipiaguin siguió exhortando a Markélov-, y usted nos odia.

¡Buena compasión! ¡A Siberia, a los trabajos forzados! Esta es su compasión. ¡Ah! ¡Déjeme... déjeme, por el amor de Dios!

Y Markélov bajó la cabeza.

Tenía el alma muy agitada, aunque exteriormente estuviera tranquilo. Se sentía sobre todo torturado por haber sido traicionado... ¿por quien? ¡Por Ereméi de Golopliók! ¡Aquel mismo Ereméi, en quien había confiado tan ciegamente! Que Mendeléi, el Malhumorado, no le hubiese seguido no le sorprendió... Mendeléi estaba borracho y por eso tenía miedo. ¡Pero Ereméi! Para Markélov, Ereméi era como la encarnación del pueblo ruso... ¡Y le había traicionado! ¿Estaría equivocado en cuanto a la causa? ¿Sería Kisliakov un mentiroso? ¿Daria Vasili Nikoláievich órdenes estúpidas? ¿Y todos aquellos artículos, libros, obras de socialistas, de pensadores, todas las letras que le parecían la verdad invencible, seria todo paja? ¿Lo sería? Y aquella comparación de un absceso maduro aguardando la punta del bisturi, ¿no pasaria de ser una farsa? «¡No, no!», murmuró para sí. Y en su rostro bronceado se esparció un leve rubor. «¡No! Todo aquello era verdad, todo... La culpa es toda mía, fui yo quien no supe decir y hacer bien las cosas. Simplemente tenía que haber dado órdenes y si alguien hubiera intentado retroceder u objetar algo... meterle una bala en la frente. No hay otra forma de actuar. Quien no está con nosotros no tiene el derecho de vivir... ¿No matan a los espías como perros, o peor aún que perros?»

Y surgieron de nuevo, en la mente de Markélov, todos los detalles de su captura... Primero, el silencio, las miradas maliciosas, los gritos venidos del fondo de la multitud... Alguien se le acercó, como si hiciera una reverencia. Después un ruido súbito. Y como lo echaron al suelo... «Chicos... chicos... ¿qué hacéis?» Y ellos: «¡Un cinturón! ¡Sujetadle!» Después sus huesos que estallaban... y una rabia inaudita... basura en la boca, en la nariz... «¡Traedle, traedle... al carro!» Alguien bramó riendo.

«No tenía que haber sido así... no hice bien las cosas...»

Era aquello lo que más le torturaba. El hecho de que le hubieran cogido era su desgracia personal, porque no tenía nada que ver con la causa... él podía aguantar... ¡pero Ereméi! ¡Ereméi!

Mientras Markélov estaba allí con la cabeza inclinada hacia su pecho, Sipiaguin había llevado al gobernador aparte y empezó a hablar con él en voz baja, agitando un poco la mano, apoyando dos dedos en su pequeña frente como deseando indicar que aquel infeliz no estaba bien de la cabeza, a fin de despertar si no la compasión, por lo menos la indulgencia del gobernador para aquel loco. Pero el gobernador se encogió de hombros, abrió y cerró los ojos,

lamentó su imposibilidad de hacer algo aunque, sin embargo, hizo una promesa vaga... *«Tous les égards... certainement, tous les égards...»* Se oyeron sus palabras suaves, agradables, fluyendo a través del bigote perfumado:

-Pero tú sabes que ¡la ley es la ley!

-¡Claro que sí! -respondió Sipiaguin con una especie de severidad obediente.

Mientras ellos conversaban en un rincón, Kaloméitsev no podía estarse quieto en el mismo sitio, caminaba hacia atrás y hacia adelante, susurraba y tartamudeaba, exhibía todo tipo de señales de gran impaciencia. Por fin, se dirigió a Sipiaguin y dijo apresuradamente: -*Vous oubliez l'autre!*

-*¡Ah,* sí! -dijo Sipiaguin en voz alta-. *Merci de me l'avoir* rappelé. Tengo que llamar la atención de Su Excelencia -dijo, dirigiéndose al gobernador. Habló a su amigo *Voldemar* de esa manera formal para no comprometer el prestigio de la autoridad en presencia de un preso-. ...sobre el hecho de que el loco intento de mi *beau- frére* tiene algunas ramificaciones y que una de ellas... o sea, una de las personas sospechosas... se encuentra no muy lejos de esta ciudad. Traje conmigo -añadió en voz baja- a uno de ellos, que está en tu sala de visitas... Le traje conmigo.

El gobernador miró a Sipiaguin y pensó con admiración: «¡Qué hombre!», y dio una orden. Un minuto después, Sila Paklin estaba delante de él.

Sila Paklin empezó una gran reverencia al gobernador. Pero, cuando advertió la presencia de Markélov, no la terminó y quedó como estaba, torciéndose el sombrero con las manos. Markélov le miró distraídamente, pero apenas le reconoció, pues de nuevo se había recogido en sus pensamientos.

-¿Es ésta la ramificación? -preguntó el gobernador señalando a Paklin con uno de sus grandes dedos blancos adornado con una enorme turquesa.

-¡Oh, no! -respondió Sipiaguin con una leve sonrisa-. De todas maneras, ¡quién sabe! -añadió después de pensar un poco-. Excelentísimo señor -dijo de nuevo en voz alta-, delante de usted está un tal señor Paklin. Por lo que sé, vive en San Petersburgo y es amigo íntimo de una cierta persona que ocupó el lugar de profesor en mi casa, de la que huyó llevándose con él... me ruborizo sólo de referirlo... a una muchacha que es sobrina mía.

-*Ah! Oui, oui* -murmuró el gobernador y sacudió la cabeza de abajo hacia arriba.

Sipiaguin levantó la voz.

Esa persona es un tal señor Nezhdánov, de quien tengo fuertes sospechas de ideas y teorías que creo peligrosas...

-*Un rouge á tous crins* -interrumpió Kaloméitsev.

-...de ideas y teorías que creo peligrosas -repitió enfáticamente Sipiaguin-. Sin duda alguna Nezhdánov no es ajeno a toda esta propaganda y está... escondido, como me dijo el señor Paklin, en la fábrica del comerciante Faléiev...

Al oír las palabras "como me dijo", Markélov echó otra mirada a Paklin y sólo sonrió, lentamente y con indiferencia.

-Perdón, perdón, Excelentísimo Señor -gritó Paklin-, fue el señor..., el señor Sipiaguin, yo nunca... nunca...

¿Dijo el comerciante Faléiev? -preguntó el gobernador a Sipiaguin, haciendo con las manos un gesto hacia Paklin, como si le dijera: «¡Tranquilo, querido señor, tranquilo!-. Pero ¿qué demonios pasa con nuestros respetables comerciantes barbudos? Ayer también fue detenido uno que estaba relacionado con el mismo asunto. Debes haber oído hablar de él: Golushkin, un hombre muy rico. Aunque éste no hace revoluciones. Y, además ya está arrodillado.

-El comerciante Faléiev no tiene nada que ver con esto -explicó Sipiaguin-. No sé nada de sus ideas: hablo sólo de la fábrica, donde, según palabras del señor Paklin, se encuentra en este momento el señor Nezhdánov.

-¡Yo no dije nada de eso! -gritó de nuevo Paklin-. ¡Fue usted quien lo dijo!

-Por favor, señor Paklin -dijo Sipiaguin, precisando-. Yo admiro mucho el sentimiento de la amistad que le hace «denegar». -(«¡Un auténtico Guizot!» pensó el gobernador.)- Pero debe seguir mi ejemplo. ¿Cree que el sentimiento familiar no es tan fuerte como el de la

Comentario [Librodot-179]: Haré todo lo que sea posible... sin duda, todo lo que sea posible.

Comentario [Librodot-180]: ¡Se olvida del otro!

Comentario [Librodot-181]: Gracias por recordármelo.

Comentario [Librodot-182]: Cuñado.

Comentario [Librodot-183]: Un rojo de los pies a la cabeza.

Librodot

amistad? Además hay otro sentimiento, mi querido señor, que es aún más fuerte y que debe guiar todas nuestras acciones y hechos: ¡el sentimiento del deber!

-Le sentiment du devoir -aclaró Kaloméitsev.

Comentario [Librodot-184]: El sentimiento del deber.

Markélov miró a los dos interlocutores de una vez.

-Señor gobernador -dijo éste- se lo pido por segunda vez: ordene que me lleven lejos de este par de lenguaraces.

Pero aquí el gobernador perdió un poco la paciencia.

¡Señor Markélov! -exclamó-. Le aconsejo, teniendo en cuenta su posición, que sea más discreto con su lengua y más respetuoso hacia las personas mayores... ¡sobre todo cuando éstas expresan sentimientos patrióticos como los que acaba de escuchar en boca de su *beaufrere!* No olvidaré, mi querido Borís -continuó el gobernador dirigiéndose a Sipiaguin-, relatar tu bello gesto al ministro. Pero ¿con quién está Nezhdánov en esa fábrica?

Sipiaguin frunció la frente.

Con un tal señor Solomin, el ingenierojefe, según me dijo el señor Paklin.

Parecía que Sipiaguin tenía un placer particular en mortificar al pobre Sílushka: le había hecho pagar caro el puro con que le había obsequiado en el carruaje así como la cortesía familiar e incluso algo juguetona de su comportamiento.

-Y ese tal Solomin -añadió Kaloméitsev- es, sin duda alguna, un radical y un republicano, y no estaría demás que Su Excelencia dirigiera su atención también hacia él.

-¿Conoce a estos señores... a Solomin... y a... cual es el otro?... ¿Nezhdánov? -preguntó el gobernador a Markélov en tono autoritario.

Markélov suspiró furiosamente por las narices.

-Y Su Excelencia... ¿conoce a Confucio... y a Tito Livio?

El gobernador se giró.

-Il n y a pas moyen de causer avec cet homme -respondió encogiéndose de hombros-. Barón, venga, por favor.

Comentario [Librodot-185]: No hay manera de conversar con este hombre.

El ayudante se acercó, pero Paklin aprovechó la oportunidad y cojeó hasta Sipiaguin.

-¿Qué hace? -murmuró-. ¿Por qué quiere perder a su sobrina? ¡Ella está con él, con Nezhdánov!

-Yo no pierdo a nadie, querido señor -respondió Sipiaguin en voz alta-. Hago lo que mi conciencia me ordena y...

-Y lo que su esposa, mi hermana, le ordena, pues lo tiene completamente dominado -intervino Markélov en voz alta.

Sipiaguin ni siquiera parpadeó. ¡Aquello estaba tan por debajo de él!

-Oiga continuó Paklin temblando de emoción y, quizá, de timidez, aunque el brillo de sus ojos era producto del odio que sentía y las lágrimas que le tomaban la garganta eran lágrimas de pena por *ellos y* de humillación por sí mismo-. Oiga, le dije que ella se casó con Nezhdánov, pero no es verdad, ¡le mentí! Pero esa boda se celebrará y si trata de impedirla, si la policía aparece por allá, habrá una mancha en su conciencia que nunca podrá borrar, y...

-Si la noticia que me da -le interrumpió Sipiaguin en voz aún más alta- es cierta, lo que dudo, sólo podrá apresurar las medidas que considero necesario tomar. Y por lo que concierne a mi conciencia, le pido, querido señor, que no se preocupe.

-La pulieron, hermano -interrumpió de nuevo Markélov-, la pulieron con barniz de San Petersburgo. No hay agua que la consiga lavar. Y tú, señor Paklin, ¡puedes decir lo que quieras que no conseguirás nada!

El gobernador consideró que debía acabar con toda aquella discusión.

-Creo -dijo-, que todos ya han hablado suficiente. Mi querido barón: llévese al señor Markélov. *N'est ce pas, Borís,* que ¿ya no lo necesitas?...

Comentario [Librodot-186]: ¿No es verdad, Borís?

Sipiaguin se sacudió las manos.

-Ya dije todo lo que podía decir.

¡Muy bien!... ¡Mi querido barón!...

El ayudante se acercó a Markélov, batió las espuelas, hizo un movimiento horizontal con la mano...

-¡Por favor!

Markélov se giró y salió. Paklin, aunque sólo con su imaginación, pero con amarga compasión y pena, le apretó la mano.

Enviaremos nuestros hombres a esa fábrica -continuó el gobernador-. Pero, una cosa, Boris: me parece que este barin -movió la barbilla en dirección a Paklin- te dijo algo sobre tu sobrina... Parece que ella está también en la fábrica... Si es así...

-Claro que no la pueden detener -observó Sipiaguin, pensativo-. Pero quizá ella vuelva en sí y decida regresar. Si me lo permites, le enviaré un mensaje...

Naturalmente. Y puedes, además, estar seguro de que... *Nous coffrerons le quidam... mais nous sommes galants avec les clames... et avec cellela donc!*

-Pero nada ha dicho sobre ese Solomin -exclamó, en tono de queja, Kaloméitsev, que durante todo este tiempo intentaba escuchar lo que decían *á part* el gobernador y Sipiaguin-. ¡Le aseguro que es el principal instigador! ¡Yo tengo un olfato para estas cosas... tengo un olfato!

-Pas trop de zéle, querido Simeón Petróvich -observó el gobernador sonriendo-. ¡Recuerde a Talleyrand! Si es así, no escapará. Usted haría mejor en pensar en su... kkk...k! -y el gobernador hizo un gesto de apretar su propia garganta-. A propósito dijo, dirigiéndose de nuevo a Sipiaguin-, *et ce gaillard-lá...* -señaló de nuevo a Paklin con la barbilla- *...qu'en ferons* nous? No parece peligroso.

-Déjale que se vaya -dijo Sipiaguin en voz baja. Y siguió en alemán-: *Lass' den Lumpen* laufen!

Pensaba que estaba haciendo una citación del *Gótz von Berlichingen,* de Goethe.

-Puede largarse, querido señor -dijo el gobernador en voz alta-. Ya no le necesitamos más. ¡Buenos días!

Paklin hizo una reverencia a todos en general y salió a la calle completamente aplastado y abatido. ¡Señor! ¡Señor! Aquel desprecio le había destrozado.

¿Pero qué es todo esto? -pensó, con un desespero inexpresable-. ¿Soy un cobarde y un traidor? No... no... soy un hombre honesto, un caballero... y ¡aún me queda algo de coraje!

Pero ¿quién era aquella figura conocida, sentada en los escalones de la casa del gobernador y que le observaba con una mirada abatida y llena de censuras? Era el viejo siervo de Markélov. Había venido en busca de su barin y no se alejaba de la puerta de la cárcel... Pero ¿por qué miraba a Paklin de aquella manera? ¡Él no había traicionado a Markélov!

-Pero, ¿por qué fui a meter la nariz adonde no me llamaban? -pensó de nuevo, desesperado-. ¿Por qué no me quedé tranquilamente en casa? Y ahora dirán y escribirán que un tal Paklin les traicionó... ¡que entregó sus amigos al enemigo! -recordó la mirada que Markélov le había echado y recordó sus últimas palabras-: «¡Puedes decir lo que quieras que no conseguirás nada!». Y después aquellos ojos envejecidos, abatidos, aplastados. Y, tal como quedó dicho en las escrituras, "lloró lágrimas amargas", y corrió a refugiarse a su oasis, junto a Fómushka y Fímushka y Snandulia...

XXXVI

CUANDO Marianna, esa misma mañana, salió de su habitación, vio a Nezhdánov vestido y sentado en el diván. Tenía la cabeza apoyada en una mano, mientras la otra le caía, débil e inerte, sobre las rodillas. Le dijo:

Buenos días, Alexéi... ¿No te desnudaste? ¿No has dormido? ¡Estás tan pálido!

Los párpados se le levantaron lentamente.

-No, no me metí en la cama.

-¿No te sientes bien? O ¿aún es por lo que pasó ayer?

Nezhdánov movió la cabeza.

-Después de que Solomin entrara en tu habitación, no conseguí dormir.

Comentario [Librodot-187]: Cogeremos al sujeto... pero somos galantes con las señoras... y ¡sobre todo con esta!

Comentario [Librodot-188]: Nada de exagerar. [Frase de Talleyrand].

Comentario [Librodot-189]: Y aquel fulano... ¿que haremos con él?

Comentario [Librodot-190]: ¡Deje que el granuja se vaya!

-¿Cuándo?

-Anoche.

-Alexéi, ¿tienes celos? ¡Qué ideas! ¡Tener celos en un momento como éste! Él no tardó más de un cuarto de hora... Estuvimos hablando de su primo, el cura, y de nuestra boda.

-Ya sé que él no tardó más de un cuarto de hora. Le vi salir. Y no tengo celos. ¡oh no! Pero no conseguí dormir después de eso.

Pero ¿por qué?

Nezhdánov permaneció callado.

Estuve pensando... pensando... pensando...

-¿En qué?

-En ti... en él... yen mí.

-Y ¿a qué conclusión llegaste?

¿Quieres que te lo diga, Marianna?

-Di.

-He pensado que soy una molestia... para ti... para él... e incluso para mí.

-¡Para mí! ¡Para él! Creo que sé lo que quieres decir, aunque asegures que no tienes celos. Pero... ¿una molestia hasta para ti?

-Marianna, en mí hay dos hombres, y uno de ellos no deja vivir al otro. Por eso, creo que sería mejor si ambos dejaran de existir.

-Por favor, Alexéi. ¿Por qué motivo te torturas a ti mismo... y a mí? Deberíamos estar pensando en la manera de huir... No nos dejarán tranquilos.

Nezhdánov le cogió la mano con ternura.

-Siéntate a mi lado, Marianna, y hablemos un poco como buenos amigos, mientras aún tengamos tiempo. Dame tu mano. No estaría de más que buscáramos una explicación... aunque haya quien piense que las explicaciones normalmente aún causan más confusión. Pero tú eres bondadosa e inteligente y me comprenderás... incluso en las cosas que yo no consigo explicar bien. Siéntate.

La voz de Nezhdánov era muy suave, y una ternura particular, amistosa, le brillaba en los ojos al contemplar fijamente a Marianna.

Ella se sentó a su lado y le cogió la mano.

-Gracias, querida... escúchame. No te tomaré mucho tiempo. Durante la noche estuve pensando todo lo que tenía que decirte. Óyeme bien. No pienses que lo que pasó ayer me sabe mal. Es probable que estuviera bastante ridículo e incluso un poco sórdido, pero estoy convencido de que tú no pensaste nada malo de mí... ya que me conoces bien. Dije que eso no me supo mal, pero no es cierto... sí me molestó, pero no por el hecho de haber vuelto a casa borracho. Me molestó porque, finalmente, me convencí de mi ineptitud. Y no sólo porque no puedo beber como beben los rusos... sino ¡por todo! ¡De todo! Marianna, debo decirte que yo ya no creo en la causa que nos unió, con la fuerza por la cual huimos juntos de aquella casa. Si he de serte sincero yo ya había perdido la fe cuando tu entusiasmo logró exaltarme de nuevo. ¡Pero no creo! ¡No creo!

Puso una mano sobre sus ojos y quedó un instante callado. Marianna no dijo nada y bajó los suyos... sentía que él no le había contado nada de nuevo.

-Antes pensaba -continuó Nezhdánov, quitando la mano de los ojos pero ya sin mirar a Marianna-, que ya no creía en la causa, pero tenía fe en mí, en mi fuerza, en mi capacidad. Pensaba que mi capacidad no estaba a la altura de mis convicciones... Pero, evidentemente, no se pueden separar ambas cosas. Y ¿de qué sirve engañarnos? No... no creo en la *causa en sí. Y* tú, Marianna, ¿crees?

Marianna se enderezó y levantó la cabeza.

-Sí, Alexéi, creo. Creo con todas las fuerzas de mi alma... y le dedicaré toda mi vida. Hasta el último aliento. Nezhdánov se volvió hacia ella y la midió con una mirada conmovida y envidiosa.

-Sí, ya sabía que tu respuesta seria ésta. Por tanto, nada tenemos que hacer juntos: tú misma cortaste nuestros lazos de una vez.

Marianna quedó callada.

-Mira, por ejemplo, a Solomin -continuó Nezhdánov-. Aunque él no cree...

-¿Cómo?

-No, ¡él no cree!... pero no necesita creer... Él avanza lentamente hacia adelante. Un hombre que va por la calle de una ciudad no pone en duda la existencia de esta ciudad. Sigue sólo su camino. Así es Solomin. Y no necesita nada más. Pero yo... no puedo ir hacia adelante. Ni hacia atrás. Estoy parado en el mismo sitio. ¿Cómo puedo tener el coraje de pedir a alguien que sea mi compañero? Ya conoces el proverbio: «Con dos personas cargando, el peso será menor.» Pero si una de ellas no puede aguantar su lado... ¿qué podrá hacer la otra?

-Alexéi -dijo Marianna indecisa-, me parece que exageras. Nos queremos.

Nezhdánov suspiró profundamente.

-Marianna... Mi respeto hacia ti es grande... tú te compadeces de mí... y cada uno de nosotros tiene confianza en la honestidad del otro. Pero la verdad es esta: no hay amor entre nosotros.

Espera, Alexéi, ¿cómo puedes decir esto? De un momento a otro la policía puede venir por nosotros... Tenemos que huir juntos y no separarnos.

-Sí, e ir a ver al reverendo Zósimo para que nos case tal como dice Solomin. Sé muy bien que a tus ojos esa boda no es más que un pasaporte, una manera de evitar dificultades con la policía... pero, a la vez, nos ligará un poco... tendremos que vivir juntos... si no *obligatoriedad,* ello presupone el deseo de vivir juntos.

-¿Qué significa esto, Alexéi? ¿Que te quedarás aquí?

La palabra «Sí» casi se escapó de la boca de Nezhdánov, pero se contuvo y dijo:

-N... n... no.

Entonces ¿vas a un lugar diferente de aquel adónde yo voy?

Nezhdánov le apretó la mano, que aún retenía en la suya.

Dejarte sin protección, sin nadie que te defienda, sería un acto criminal. No haré eso, por peor que yo pueda ser. Tendrás quien te ampare... ¡Puedes estar tranquila!

Marianna se inclinó hacia Nezhdánov y, acercando más su rostro hacia él, intentó mirarle a los ojos, al alma... a la misma alma.

-¿Qué pasa, Alexéi? ¿Qué tienes en el corazón? ¡Dime!... Me das miedo. Tus palabras son tan enigmáticas, tan extrañas... Y tu rostro... ¡Nunca te vi así!

Nezhdánov se apartó tranquilamente y le besó la mano con ternura. Esta vez ella no resistió, no rió, yse quedó sentada mirándole pensativa y ansiosamente.

-No te preocupes, ¡por favor! No hay nada de extraño. Guarda tu preocupación para otras cosas. Dicen que los mujiks pegaron a Markélov, que le aplastaron las costillas. Él sintió sus golpes... A mí no me pegaron, incluso bebieron conmigo, bebieron a mi salud... pero me aplastaron el alma de la misma forma que a Markélov las costillas... Yo nací torcido... quise enderezarme, pero aún me he torcido más. He aquí precisamente lo que ves en mi rostro.

-Alexéi -dijo lentamente Marianna-, sería un pecado que no fueras sincero conmigo.

El le apretó las manos con fuerza.

-Marianna, todo mi ser está delante de ti como en las palmas de mis manos. Y te diré anticipadamente lo que decida. ¡No tendrás sorpresas!

Marianna quería pedirle que aclarara aquellas palabras, pero no lo hizo... porque en aquel momento Solomin entró en la habitación.

Sus movimientos eran más rápidos de lo habitual. Tenía los ojos semicerrados, los labios apretados, en todo su rostro había una expresión en cierto modo más tensa y seca, firme y un poco ruda.

-Queridos amigos -empezó-, tengo que pediros que os déis prisa. Arreglaos... llegó el momento de marchar. Estad preparados para dentro de una hora. Tenemos que realizar vuestra boda. No hay noticias de Paklin. Los caballos permanecieron algún tiempo en Arzhánov y después volvieron... El se quedó allá. Probablemente lo llevaron a la ciudad. No creo que nos haya denunciado, aunque quizá sí lo haya hecho inconcientemente. Además, podrían deducir donde estáis por los caballos. Mi primo ya ha sido avisado. Pável irá con vosotros. El será vuestro testigo.

Librodot

-¿Y usted... y tú? -preguntó Nezhdánov-. ¿No te largas? Veo que vas vestido para salir -añadió, indicando con los dedos las botas altas que Solomin llevaba.

-Me las puse... porque hay fango en el patio.

-Pero ¿no te responsabilizarán por nosotros?

-No lo creo. De todos modos... es un problema mío. Bueno, dentro de una hora. Marianna, creo que Tatiana quiere verla. Tiene algo preparado para usted. Ah, ¿sí? Yo también quería verla...

Marianna se dirigió a la puerta.

En el rostro de Nezhdánov surgió una expresión extraña, mezcla de miedo y desespero.

-Marianna, ¿te vas? -dijo éste de golpe, con una voz desilusionada.

Ella se detuvo.

Estaré de vuelta dentro de media hora. Después ya arreglaré las cosas en un instante.

-Sí, pero ven...

De acuerdo, pero ¿para qué?

-Aún quiero mirarte una vez más. -La observó intensamente-. ¡Adiós! ¡Adiós, Marianna! -Ella quedó confusa-. ¿Cómo?... ¿Qué digo yo? ¡Qué cosas estoy diciendo! Si vas a volver dentro de media hora, ¿verdad?

-Claro.

Claro... Perdona. Tengo la cabeza confusa por la falta de sueño. Voy a empezar... a hacer las maletas... Marianna salió. Solomin quería acompañarla. Nezhdánov le detuvo.

¡Solomin!

-¿Qué ocurre?

-Dame tu mano. Quiero agradecer tu hospitalidad. Solomin sonrió.

¡Qué idea tan extraña!

Pero le alargó la mano.

-Y una cosa más -continuó Nezhdánov-. Si me pasa algo, ¿puedo confiar en que no abandonarás a Marianna?

-¿Tu futura esposa?

-Sí..., bueno, Marianna.

-En primer lugar, estoy seguro de que no te pasará nada; en segundo lugar, puedes estar tranquilo: Marianna me es tan querida como a ti.

-¡Oh, lo sé... lo sé... lo sé! Está bien, de acuerdo. Y gracias. ¿Dentro de una hora?

-Dentro de una hora.

-Estaré listo. ¡Adiós!

Solomin salió y alcanzó a Marianna en la escalera. Quería decirle algo sobre Nezhdánov, pero se calló. Y Marianna, por su lado, comprendió que Solomin quería decirle algo sobre Nezhdánov, y que se lo callaba. Y tampoco dijo nada.

XVII

TAN pronto como Solomin salió, Nezhdánov saltó rápidamente del diván, dio dos vueltas por la habitación y después se quedó de pie un momento en una especie de indecisión rígida. De repente se volvió, se quitó apresuradamente su "mascarada", que tiró a un rincón, y se puso su antiguo traje. Después se dirigió hasta la mesilla de tres pies, sacó de un cajón dos cartas lacradas y otro objeto pequeño que se metió en el bolsillo. Dejó las cartas sobre la mesilla. Después se puso en cuclillas ante la chimenea y abrió la portezuela... Dentro, había un montón de cenizas. Era todo lo que quedaba de sus papeles, de su cuaderno íntimo... Los había quemado durante la noche. A un lado de la chimenea, tumbado, apoyado en la pared, estaba el retrato de Marianna que Markélov le había dado. Era evidente que no había tenido coraje para quemarlo. Nezhdánov lo cogió cuidadosamente y lo colocó en la mesilla al lado de las dos cartas lacradas.

Después, con un movimiento decidido de la mano, se puso el gorro y se dirigió hacia la puerta... pero se detuvo, volvió atrás y entró en la habitación de Marianna. Estuvo allí de pie un momento, miró alrededor y, acercándose a su pequeña cama, se inclinó y, con un sollozo contenido, apretó los labios contra los pies de la cama. Después se volvió y, tirándose el gorro hacia la frente, salió.

Sin encontrar a nadie ni en el pasillo ni en la escalera, ni abajo, Nezhdánov llegó al jardín. El día estaba gris, el cielo bajo y una brisa húmeda soplaba haciendo ondular la hierba a la vez que sacudía las hojas de los árboles. La fábrica hacía menos ruido que de costumbre a esa hora del día; del patio venía olor a carbón, cebo y alquitrán. Nezhdánov miró alrededor, desconfiado, y se dirigió rápidamente al viejo manzano que le había llamado la atención el día que había llegado, cuando por primera vez había mirado desde la ventana de su habitación. El tronco del manzano estaba cubierto de musgo seco; sus ramas arrugadas, desnudas, estaban regularmente cubiertas por hojas verderosadas y dobladas hacia arriba, como brazos viejos en señal de súplica. Nezhdánov clavó firmemente los pies en la tierra oscura que cercaba las raíces del manzano, y sacó de su bolsillo aquel pequeño objeto que estaba en el cajón de la mesilla. Después miró fijamente las ventanas de la casa. «Si alguien me viera ahora», pensó, «quizá no lo hiciera...» Pero ningún rostro humano apareció... todos parecían muertos, todos se alejaban de él, le abandonaban para siempre, le dejaban a merced de su destino. Sólo el zumbido sordo y el olor de la fábrica; y desde el cielo empezó a caer una lluvia leve, picante, fría.

Entonces Nezhdánov miró, a través de las ramas torcidas del árbol bajo el cual estaba, hacia el cielo bajo, gris, indiferente y húmedo. Bostezó y pensó: «Nada me queda. No volveré a San Petersburgo para ir a la cárcel.» Echó el gorro al suelo y, anticipadamente, sintió en todo su cuerpo un peso suave, fuerte, doloroso, apoyó el revólver al pecho y apretó el gatillo.

Algo le alcanzó instantáneamente, aunque sin mucha fuerza... pero estaba ya tumbado de espaldas e intentaba comprender lo que le había pasado y cómo era posible que viera a Tatiana. Quiso llamarla y decirle: «¡Ah, no sufras por mí!» Pero ya lo confundía todo. Sobre su rostro, en los ojos, en la frente, en el cerebro, un remolinoconfuso y verde... y un peso terrible y torpe le oprimía para siempre contra la tierra.

Nezhdánov había, realmente, avistado a Tatiana. En el momento exacto en que había apretado el gatillo, ella, asomada a una de las ventanas, le vio bajo el manzano y se preguntó: «¿Qué hará allí sin sombrero con esta lluvia?», cuando él cayó hacia atrás como una hoja. No oyó el disparo, pues el sonido había sido muy débil, pero sintió que algo había pasado y corrió hacia el jardín... Llegó junto a Nezhdánov... «Alexéi Dmítrich, ¿que le ocurre?» Pero las tinieblas ya habían caído sobre él. Tatiana se inclinó y vio la sangre.

-¡Pável! -gritó, con la voz sobresaltada-. ¡Pável!

Instantes después, llegaron Marianna, Solomin, Pável y aún dos obreros que estaban en el jardín. Levantaron a Nezhdánov, le llevaron hacia dentro y le tumbaron en el mismo diván donde había pasado la última noche.

Quedó tumbado de espaldas, con los ojos inmóviles y semicerrados, el rostro azulado y sollozando arrastradamente, como sofocado. La vida aún no le había abandonado. Marianna y Solomin estaban a ambos lados del diván, casi tan pálidos como Nezhdánov. Estaban aterrorizados, conmovidos, abatidos -sobre todo Marianna-, pero no sorprendidos. «¿Cómo es posible que no lo previéramos?», pensaban. Y en ese momento les pareció que... sí, que ya lo habían previsto. Cuando Nezhdánov había dicho a Marianna: «Te diré anticipadamente lo que decida. ¡No tendrás sorpresas!», e incluso había hablado de los dos hombres que había en él y que no podían vivir juntos, ¿no había tenido ella una especie de vago presentimiento? ¿Por qué no se había quedado con él cuando oyó aquellas palabras y cuando tuvo aquel presentimiento? ¿Por qué razón ahora no podía mirar a Solomin, como si él fuera su cómplice... como si él tuviera también la conciencia comprometida? ¿Por que razón no sólo sentía una lástima infinita, desesperada, por Nezhdánov, sino al mismo tiempo horror, miedo... y vergüenza? ¿Podría haberlo salvado? ¿Por qué razón ambos no podían hablar? Casi no conseguían respirar... y aguardaban... ¿Pero qué? ¡Dios mío!

Librodot

Solomin hizo llamar a un médico, aunque no hubiese esperanzas. Tatiana bañó la pequeña herida de Nezhdánov, ya negra y sin sangre, con agua fría, le limpió también la frente con agua fría y vinagre. De golpe Nezhdánov se movió un poco e hizo un ruido con la garganta.

-Está volviendo en sí -murmuró Solomin. Marianna cayó de rodillas al lado del diván. Nezhdánov la miró. Hasta ese momento sus ojos habían estado inmóviles, como los ojos de todos los moribundos.

-Todavía estoy... vivo -dijo de una manera casi inaudible-. Ni esto supe hacer... os estoy retrasando. -Aliosha -sollozó Marianna.

-No tardará... ¿Te acuerdas, Marianna, de mi... poema... "cércame de flores"?... Da igual... desde que tú... Allá, en mi carta...

De golpe se estremeció.

-Ah, aquí viene... Cogeos las manos... delante de mí... deprisa... deprisa...

Solomin cogió la mano de Marianna. La cabeza de la muchacha estaba en el diván, el rostro hacia abajo, cerca de la misma herida.

Solomin estaba de pie, severo y sombrío como la noche.

-Así... bien... así...

Nezhdánov empezó de nuevo a sollozar, pero de una manera extraña. El pecho se le levantó, los flancos se le dilataron.

Intentó colocar su mano en las dos manos unidas, pero la suya estaba ya muerta.

-Se está yendo -murmuró Tatiana, de pie ante la puerta. Y empezó a hacer la señal de la cruz.

Sus sollozos se hicieron más breves y espaciados. Aún buscó a Marianna con la mirada... pero una niebla blanca, amenazadora, ya le invadía.

-Bien... -fue su última palabra.

Ya no estaba allí... y las manos unidas de Solomin y Marianna aún seguían sobre su pecho.

He aquí lo que había escrito en las dos cartas de despedida. Una estaba dirigida a Silin y contenía sólo unas lineas:

«Adiós, hermano, amigo, ¡adiós! Cuando recibas este papel ya no seré de este mundo. No preguntes por qué, ni me llores. Quiero que sepas que ahora estoy mejor. Coge a nuestro inmortal Pushkin *y* lee, en el *Eugenio Oniéguin,* la descripción de la muerte de Lenski. ¿Te acuerdas? «Las ventanas están blancas, la señora salió, etc. Es todo. No tengo nada más que decirte... Mejor dicho: tengo tantas cosas que decirte, pero no tengo tiempo. No quería irme sin decírtelo, pues podías pensar que estaba vivo y quedaría manchada nuestra amistad. Adiós. Vive.

Tu amigo, A. N.»

La otra carta era un poco más extensa. Iba dirigida a Solomin y a Marianna, y decía:

«Hijos míos!»

(Después de estas palabras había una interrupción, como si algo hubiera sido raspado o borrado, como si unas lágrimas hubiesen caído encima.)

«Quizá os parezca extraño que os trate así, yo que soy casi un niño... y sobre todo a ti, Solomin, que eres bastante mayor que yo. Pero voy a morir y, estando en el final de la vida, me veo como si fuera un viejo. Tengo que disculparme ante ambos, especialmente ante ti, Marianna, por haberos causado tantos sufrimientos (yo sé que tú, Marianna, sufrirás), y tanta intranquilidad. Pero, ¿qué podía hacer? No encontré otra salida. No pude *simplificarme.* Sin embargo, sólo me quedaba desaparecer, Marianna, pues habría sido un peso para ti y para mí. Tú eres generosa, habrías soportado ese peso alegremente, como un nuevo sacrificio... pero yo no tenía el derecho a exigírtelo: tienes una tarea mejor y mayor ante ti. Hijos míos, dejadme uniros desde el túmulo. Viveréis felices juntos. Marianna, tú amarás a Solomin, y él... él te ama desde el primer momento en que te vio en casa de los Sipiaguin. No era secreto para mí, aunque algunos días después yo huyera contigo. ¡Ah, aquel amanecer! ¡Qué esplendoroso, fresco y joven era! Viene hacia mí ahora como una insignia, como un símbolo de vuestra vida

junta, la tuya y la de él. Y yo sólo por casualidad me encontré en su lugar. Pero es hora de terminar; no quiero quejarme... sólo quiero justificarme. Mañana habrá momentos muy duros... Pero ¿qué podía hacer? ¿Tenía acaso otra salida? ¡Adiós, Marianna, mi buena, querida Marianna! ¡Adiós, Solomin! Te la confío. ¡Sed felices... vivid para los demás! Y tú, Marianna, recuérdame sólo cuando te sientas feliz. Recuérdame como un hombre puro y bueno, pero a quien la muerte fue mejor que la vida. ¿Te habría yo amado? No lo sé, mi buena amiga, pero sé que nunca había sentido lo que por ti sentí y que me hubiera costado mucho más morir si no hubiera llevado dentro de mí este sentimiento.

»¡Marianna! Si encuentras alguna vez a una muchacha llamada Mashúrina -Solomin la conoce y tú parece que la viste una vez- dile que la recordé con gratitud poco antes de morir... Ella lo comprenderá.

»Pero tengo que terminar esta carta. Miré ahora por la ventana y vi una bella estrella entre las nubes apresuradas. Por más que la persigan... no podrán ocultarla. Me pareció que esa estrella eras tú, Marianna. En este momento tú duermes en la habitación de al lado, y no sospechas nada... Fui hasta tu puerta, apoyé la oreja y me pareció escuchar tu respiración pura, calma... ¡Adiós! ¡Adiós! ¡Adiós, hijos míos, amigos míos!

Vuestro, A.

»¡Ah! ¿Cómo es que en mi carta de despedida no he dicho nada de nuestra gran causa? Quizá porque en la hora de la muerte no se puede mentir... Marianna, perdóname por esta postdata... El error está en mí, ¡no en aquello en lo que tú crees!

»Sí, aún quiero decirte que tú quizá pienses, Marianna, que yo tenía miedo a ser apresado, y que esto fue una manera de huir. Pero no, hay cosas más terribles que la cárcel, pues es inimaginable estar preso por una causa en la que no se cree. ¡No es por miedo a la cárcel por lo que acabo conmigo!»

Marianna y Solomin leyeron esta carta uno detrás del otro. Después ella metió su retrato y las dos cartas en el bolsillo, y se quedó inmóvil.

Solomin le dijo:

-Todo está listo, Marianna. Tenemos que cumplir su última voluntad.

Marianna se acercó a Nezhdánov, apretó los labios contra su frente ya fría y, volviéndose hacia Solomin, dijo:

-Vamos.

Él le cogió la mano, y salieron juntos.

Cuando, algunas horas después, la policía llegó a la fábrica, sólo encontró el cadáver. Tatiana lo había tendido en el diván, le había colocado una almohada bajo la cabeza pálida, le había cruzado los brazos, y le había puesto incluso un ramo de flores a su lado sobre la mesilla. Pável, que había recibido las instrucciones necesarias, acogió a los agentes de la policía con el mayor respeto y tal desprecio, que estos no sabían si debían darle las gracias o detenerle. Dio todos los detalles del suicidio, les ofreció queso suizo y madeira, pero del paradero de Vasili Fedótych y de la joven bárishnia no sabía absolutamente nada. Fue muy efusivo en asegurar que Vasili Fedótych nunca estaba ausente mucho tiempo a causa de su trabajo, que dentro de uno o dos días volvería y que, en seguida que volviera, les informaría. Podían contar con él.

Así, la policía se marchó aunque dejando un guardia junto al cuerpo y prometiendo enviar a un inspector para tratar de las formalidades.

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DOS días después, en el patio del "bondadoso" reverendo Zósimo, entró un carro con un mujik y una mujer, ambos ya conocidos nuestros, que al día siguiente se unieron en matrimonio. Poco después desaparecieron, y el buen Zósimo nunca se arrepentió de lo que hizo. En la fábrica, Solomin había dejado en manos de Pável una carta dirigida al propietario,

presentando una evaluación total y exacta de la situación del negocio (era extremadamente próspera) y pidiendo tres meses de vacaciones. Aquella carta había sido escrita dos días antes de la muerte de Nezhdánov, por lo que se podía ver que ya entonces Solomin consideraba necesario marchar con él y Marianna y ocultarse durante algún tiempo. La investigación sobre el suicidio no descubrió nada. El cuerpo de Nezhdánov fue enterrado; Sipiaguin desistió de buscar a la sobrina.

Al cabo de aproximadamente nueve meses, Markélov fue juzgado. En el tribunal se comportó como ante el gobernador: calmo, digno y un poco deprimido. Su habitual brusquedad había disminuido, pero no por cobardía: era otro sentimiento, más noble, el que le dominaba. No se defendió ni se lamentó por lo que había hecho, no culpó a nadie y no mencionó nombres. Su rostro pálido, de ojos deslucidos, tenía sólo una expresión: sumisión al destino y firmeza. Y sus respuestas cortas pero directas y honestas despertaron en los propios jueces un sentimiento muy cercano a la compasión. Incluso los mismos campesinos que le habían cogido y eran ahora testigos de cargo, compartieron ese sentimiento y se refirieron a él como un barin bondadoso y "simple". Pero su culpa era demasiado evidente y no era posible pasarla por alto. El mismo parecía considerar el castigo como una obligación. De sus cómplices, que eran pocos, Mashúrina había desaparecido y Ostrodúmov había sido muerto por un tendero a quien había incitado a la revuelta y que le dio un empujón "infeliz". En consideración a su "sincero arrepentimiento" (está con la cabeza perdida de miedo y angustia), Golushkin fue castigado con una pena leve. Kisliakov fue condenado a un mes de cárcel, transcurrido el cual le dejaron en libertad y ni tan siquiera le impidieron volver a "galopar" por las provincias. Nezhdánov había muerto. A Solomin, si bien era sospechoso, le dejaron en paz por falta de pruebas. Por otro lado, él no esquivó el juicio y compareció cuando fue requerido. Marianna ni siquiera fue mencionada... Paklin se salió muy bien: absolutamente nadie se acordó de él.

Pasó un año y medio. Era a principios de 1870. En San Petersburgo, el mismo San Petersburgo donde Sipiaguin, ahora consejero privado y camarlengo, se preparaba para ocupar un cargo importante en el mundo de la política; donde su esposa patrocinaba todas las artes, daba veladas musicales y organizaba sopas para pobres; donde Kaloméitsev era considerado uno de los más prometedores funcionarios de su ministerio; por una de las calles de la isla Vasílievski, cojeaba un hombre bajo con una chaqueta modesta con cuello de piel de tigre. Era Paklin. Había cambiado bastante desde la última vez que le vimos: en las sienes, algunos mechones de pelo plateado espiaban por debajo del gorro. En dirección contraria, en la misma acera, venía una mujer bastante llena, alta, totalmente envuelta en una capa de tejido oscuro. Paklin le echó una mirada distraída y continuó caminando, hasta que, de repente, se detuvo, abrió los brazos, y dio media vuelta muy rápida, acelerando el paso hasta alcanzarla y poder verle la cara bajo el sombrero.

Comentario [Librodot-191]: En el cuadro del funcionariado civil ruso equivalente al grado de capitán.

-Mashúrina -la llamó vacilante.

La señora le echó una mirada altiva y continuó caminando sin contestarle.

-Querida Mashúrina, la reconocí -continuó Paklin, cojeando a su lado-, pero no tiene nada que temer. No se creerá que voy a denunciarla... ¡estoy *tan* contento de haberla encontrado! Soy Paklin, Sila Paklin, ¿recuerda?, el amigo de Nezhdánov... ¿Por qué no viene hasta mi casa? Vivo a dos pasos de aquí... Venga.

-Io sono contessa Rocco di Santo Fiume! -respondió ella con una voz profunda pero con un acento espantosamente ruso.

Comentario [Librodot-192]: Soy la condesa Rocco di Santo-Fiume.

-¡Qué condesa ni que ocho cuartos! Vamos, venga conmigo y conversaremos un poco.

-¿Y dónde vive? -preguntó, de repente, en ruso, la condesa italiana-. Tengo mucha prisa.

-Aquí mismo, en esta calle, allí, ¿ve?, en aquel edificio de tres pisos. ¡Celebro que no se oculte de mí! Déme su mano, vamos. ¿Lleva aquí mucho tiempo? ¿Y cómo es que ahora es condesa? ¿Se casó con un conde italiano?

Mashúrina no se había casado con ningún conde. Le habían dado un pasaporte a nombre de una tal condesa Rocco di SantoFiume, la cual había muerto hacía poco, y así había entrado tranquilamente en Rusia, aunque no supiera una sola palabra de italiano y tuviera una cara

rusa cien por cien.

Paklin la llevó a su modesto apartamento. Una jorobada, la hermana de Páklin, con la cual vivía, salió a recibirles de detrás del tabique que separaba la pequeña cocina del pasillo.

-Mira, Snápochka -dijo Paklin-, te presento a una gran amiga. ¿Verdad que nos prepararás un té?

Comentario [Librodot-193]: Diminutivo de Snandulia.

Mashúrina, que no habría ido a casa de Paklin si éste no le hubiese mencionado a Nezhdánov, se quitó el sombrero y, pasando su mano masculina por el pelo corto, hizo una reverencia y se sentó en silencio. No había cambiado nada. Incluso el vestido era el mismo que llevaba dos años atrás. Pero en sus ojos había una expresión fija, triste, que daba un aire patético a su rostro habitualmente duro.

Snandulia fue hacia el samovar, y Paklin se sentó delante de Mashúrina, dándole una leve palmada en la rodilla y bajando la cabeza, pero cuando quiso hablar, la emoción le sofocó: la voz se le rompió y le saltaron lágrimas de los ojos. Mashúrina estaba sentada, erguida e inmóvil, sin apoyarse en el respaldo de la silla, y miraba severamente hacia el lado.

-Sí, sí empezó Paklin-, ¡qué tiempos aquellos! La miro a usted y los recuerdos vuelven a mí... los muertos y los vivos. Incluso mis periquitos murieron... pero creo recordar que usted no los conoció. Como era de prever, murieron ambos el mismo día. Y Nezhdánov... pobre Nezhdánov... Seguramente sabe...

-Sí, lo sé -dijo Mashúrina, mirando todavía hacia el lado.

-Y ¿sabe también lo que le pasó a Ostrodúmov?

Mashúrina sólo movió la cabeza. Quería que él siguiera hablando de Nezhdánov y no era capaz de decírselo. Pero él la comprendió.

-Oí decir que tuvo un recuerdo para usted en su última carta. ¿Es cierto?

Mashúrina no respondió en seguida.

Sí -exclamó por fin.

-Era un buen muchacho. Pero no consiguió ponerse en el buen camino. Servía tanto para revolucionario como yo. ¿Sabe lo que era él realmente? ¡Un romántico del realismo! ¿Me comprende?

Mashúrina echó una mirada rápida a Paklin. No le había comprendido ni quería molestarse en hacerlo. Le parecía estúpido y extraño que él tuviera el coraje de compararse con Nezhdánov, pero pensó: «Que se vanaglorie a gusto.» Aunque, en realidad él no se estaba vanagloriando sino despreciándose, según sus propias ideas.

Me buscó un tal Silin -continuó Paklin-, a quien Nezhdánov también escribió antes de morir. Pues bien, ese tal Silin quería saber si Nezhdánov no habría dejado algunos papeles. Pero las cosas de Aliosha fueron selladas... y no había allá ningún papel. Lo quemó todo... hasta los versos. ¿Sabía que él escribía versos? Lástima que hayan desaparecido. Estoy seguro de que algunos no debían ser malos. Todo desapareció con él, todo se perdió en el torbellino general, ¡y para siempre! Sólo quedaron los recuerdos de los amigos, mientras éstos, a su turno, no desaparezcan.

Paklin se calló.

-Y los Sipiaguin -dijo de nuevo-, ¿recuerda a esos condescendientes, respetables, repulsivos figurones? Están ahora en el apogeo del poder y de la gloria. -Mashúrina no recordaba a los Sipiaguin, pero Paklin los odiaba tanto, principalmente a él, que no podía ahorrarse al placer de "insultarlos"-. Dicen que su casa tiene un tono muy alto. Están siempre hablando de virtud. Pero ¿ya se ha dado cuenta de que cuando se habla mucho de virtud ésta se vuelve indiferente? Como en una habitación de enfermo donde impera el olor a desinfectantes. ¡Es porque hay algún mal olor que tapar! ¡Desconfíe siempre! ¡Pobre Alexéi! Fueron ellos quienes lo destruyeron, los Sipiaguin.

-Y Solomin, ¿qué hace? -preguntó Mashúrina. De repente quiso dejar de escuchar a *Paklin* hablando *de él.*

-¡Solomin! -exclamó Paklin-. Es un gran tipo. Salió muy bien parado. Mandó la fábrica al cuerno y se llevó consigo a sus mejores hombres. Había uno... el principal, llamado, era muy listo... llamado Pável... que también se fue con él. Dicen que tiene ahora una fábrica suya

en alguna parte, en Perm, creo, organizada según modelos cooperativos. ¡Y no se quedará estancado! Se abrirá camino. Es muy listo y persistente. Un gran tipo. Y lo principal es que no intenta curar todas las heridas de una sola vez. ¡Qué pueblo este pueblo ruso! Nos quedamos sentados esperando a que venga algo o alguien y haga desaparecer de una sola vez todos nuestros males, cure todas nuestras llagas, como si fuera un dolor de muelas. ¿Cuál será la varita mágica? ¿El darwinismo? ¿La tierra? ¿El arzobispo Perepéntiev? ¿Una guerra en el extranjero? ¡Da igual! Lo que es necesario es arrancar la muela. Todo en él es pereza, blandura, estupidez. Pero Solomin no es de esos. No, él no arranca muelas, sabe por dónde va.

Mashúrina hizo un gesto con la mano, como si quisiera decir que era mejor cambiar de asunto.

-¿Y aquella muchacha -preguntó-, no me acuerdo cómo se llama, que huyó con él... con Nezhdánov?

-¡Marianna! Ahora es la mujer de Solomin. Hace más de un año que se casaron. Primero fue solo por conveniencia, pero dicen que ahora es realmente su mujer.

Mashúrina hizo de nuevo el mismo gesto con la mano. Antes sentía celos de Marianna, pero ahora estaba indignada con ella por no haber sido fiel a la memoria de Nezhdánov.

-Seguro que ya tienen un hijo -dijo Mashúrina en tono despreocupado.

-Quizá. No lo sé. Pero ¿adónde va usted ahora? -continuó Paklin cuando vio que ella cogía el sombrero-. Espere un poco. Snándochka nos traerá el té.

No le importaba tanto que Mashúrina se quedara como el hecho de no querer dejar escapar aquella oportunidad para decir todo lo que había acumulado y le hervía en el alma. Desde su regreso a San Petersburgo, veía a muy poca gente, sobre todo a los jóvenes. El caso de Nezhdánov le aterrorizaba. Se hizo muy cauteloso y evitaba la vida social, y los jóvenes, por su lado, le miraban con desconfianza. Uno de ellos llegó incluso a llamarle abiertamente traidor. Y con los más viejos no le gustaba asociarse. Así, podía estar callado durante semanas. Con la hermana no podía desahogarse, no porque la considerase estúpida para poder comprenderlo, eso no. Tenía su inteligencia en gran estima... Pero con ella era necesario hablar seriamente y decir siempre la verdad, pues en seguida que él empezaba con sus "faroles" o a "echar fuego de artificio", ella le echaba una mirada tan especial, atenta y triste, que él se callaba avergonzado. Pero, realmente, ¿cómo puede un hombre pasar sin unos cuantos "faroles" de vez en cuanto? Y eran sólo dos. Por eso la vida en San Petersburgo empezó a hacérsele insoportable y pensaba ya en la manera de mudarse a Moscú. Tenía montones de ideas, de invenciones, de sarcasmos, de gracias y mentiras almacenadas, como agua en una presa cerrada. Ante la imposibilidad de poder abrir las compuertas el agua se estancó y se pudrió. Mashúrina las abrió... Todo le subió a la cabeza y habló, habló...

Habló de San Petersburgo, de la vida en esa ciudad, de toda Rusia. No escatimó nada ni a nadie. Todo aquello poco interesaba a Mashúrina, que, sin embargo, no le objetaba ni le interrumpía... pero a Paklin, bastante.

-Sí –exclamó-, ¡menuda época nos ha tocado vivir! La sociedad totalmente estancada; todo el mundo se aburre de muerte. En la literatura, el vacío, el vacío absoluto. En la critica... si un joven critico prometedor tiene que decir que "las gallinas ponen huevos", necesita por lo menos veinte líneas para exponer esa grandiosa verdad, ¡y asimismo todavía no lo hace suficientemente bien! Y son tan hinchados, se lo aseguro, como un colchón de plumas, completamente insípidos, y ¡siempre profiriendo en éxtasis los lugares más comunes! Por lo que se refiere a la ciencia, ¡ah! ¡ah! ¡ah! Tenemos también a nuestro *sabio Kant,* pero sólo en el cuello de los ingenieros. En las artes pasa lo mismo. Se va a un concierto y lo único que se oye es nuestro cantor nacional Agremantsk... Es un éxito grandioso... No tiene más voz que un gato, se lo digo yo, pero de todas formas canta. Incluso el propio Skoropijin, ¿sabe?, nuestro inmortal Aristarco, le elogia. «He aquí», dice él, «algo completamente diferente del arte occidental.» Y elogia también a nuestros insignificantes pintores. «Antes», decía él, «yo caía en éxtasis ante Europa, ante los italianos, pero oí a Rossini y pensé: *¡Eh, eh!; vi* a Rafael... *¡Eh, eh!...» Y* con este *¡Eh, eh!* nuestros jóvenes se dan por satisfechos e imitan a Skoropijin repitiendo: *¡Eh, eh!* Y se quedan todos tan tranquilos! Y, al mismo tiempo, el

Comentario [Librodot-194]: Se trata de un juego de palabras en que intervienen las dos acepciones de *kant* en ruso ("tubería" y "galón"), ambos con referencia a los ingenieros, en su trabajo y en la decoración del cuello de su uniforme. Hay que tener en cuenta que en la Rusia del siglo XIX muchos grupos sociales eran obligados a llevar uniforme, incluso los estudiantes, los profesores... y los ingenieros.

Comentario [Librodot-195]: Alusión irónica al cantante y director ruso Agrenev-Slavianski Dmitri Alexándrovich (18341908), organizador de un coro a capella muy conocido, cuyo repertorio estaba formado por canciones populares rusas, lamentaciones y bilinas. En 1869 recorrió toda Rusia con su coro. El tono crítico de Paklin tiene una justificación: Agrenev-Slavianski toleró la corrupción del estilo popular de las canciones.

Librodot

pueblo vive en una pobreza horrible, los impuestos lo arruinan y la única auténtica reforma que se consiguió fue que los mujiks usen gorro y las mujeres dejen el chal... ¿Y el hambre? ¿Y el alcoholismo? ¿Y la usura?

Pero aquí Mashúrina bostezó, y Paklin comprendió que tenía que cambiar de tema.

-Aún no me ha contado -dijo, volviéndose hacia ella-, dónde estuvo estos dos años, cuánto tiempo hace que volvió y lo que ha hecho... y cómo se hizo italiana...

-No hay ninguna necesidad de que usted lo sepa -interrumpió Mashúrina-. ¿Para qué? Ahora ya ya no está con nosotros...

Paklin sintió como si le apuñalasen y, para ocultar su confusión, sonrió, pero de una forma forzada.

-Como quiera -dijo-. Ya sé que la presente generación me considera un retrasado, y realmente ya no puedo considerarme... de sus filas... -No terminó la frase-. He aquí Snándochka con el té. Tome una taza mientras yo hablo... quizá encuentre algo interesante en mis palabras.

Mashúrina cogió una taza, un terrón de azúcar y empezó a beber con el terrón en la boca.

Paklin rió ahora abiertamente.

-Es una suerte que la policía no esté aquí ahora para ver una condesa italiana... ¿cómo se llama?

-Rocco di SantoFiume -dijo Mashúrina solemnemente tomando el té.

Rocco di Santo-Fiume -repitió Paklin-. Y ¡tomando té a la manera rusa! ¡Es muy sospechoso! La policía en seguida le echaría el ojo.

-En la frontera -dijo Mashúrina-, un tipo cualquiera de uniforme empezó a hacerme tantas preguntas que no me pude contener: "¡No me des la lata, por el amor de Dios!", acabé por gritar.

¿En italiano?

-No, en ruso.

¿Y él?

-Se largó, claro.

-¡Bravo! -exclamó Paklin-. Bien, condesa, ¡tome una taza más! Hay todavía una cosa que me gustaría decirle. Me pareció que se refirió a Solomin con una cierta indiferencia. Pero ¿sabe lo que le digo? Los hombres como él son auténticos. Quizá difíciles de entender al principio, pero créame que tienen autenticidad y el futuro es suyo. No son héroes, ni siquiera "héroes del trabajo", como les llamó un imbécil cualquiera, americano o inglés, en un libro que escribió sobre nosotros, pero son hombres del pueblo, fuertes, insultos, monótonos. Hoy sólo son necesarios precisamente hombres así. Mire a Solomin: un cerebro claro como el día, y con una salud de hierro... ¿No es una maravilla? ¿Por qué motivo hasta ahora, en Rusia, quien tiene sesos es generalmenteun débil? Y el corazón de Solomin siente como el nuestro, odia las cosas que nosotros odiamos, pero sus nervios no le afectan y domina el cuerpo como debe ser... Un hombre con ideales... que habla poco, educado... pero del pueblo simple... y consciente de sí mismo... ¿Qué más quiere?

-No tiene importancia -continuó Paklin, excitándose cada vez más, sin darse cuenta de que Mashúrina hacía mucho que no le escuchaba y miraba al otro lado-. No tiene importancia que ahora Rusia esté llena de originales, fanáticos, funcionarios, generales simples y condecorados, epicúreos, imitadores, imbéciles de todos los tipos. Conocí una bárishnia, una tal Javrona Príshchova, que, de repente, se hizo legitimista y aseguraba a todo el mundo que después de su muerte, si le abrían el cuerpo, encontrarían en su corazón el nombre de Enrique V grabado... Nada de esto tiene importancia, mi querida señora, porque la salvación está en la gente como Solomin, insulsos, llanos, listos. Acuérdese de que le he dicho esto en el invierno de 1870, en el momento en que Alemania está preparándose para aplastar a Francia... en el momento en qué...

-Síluchka -se oyó la voz suave de Snandulia detrás de Paklin-, parece que en tus

Comentario [Librodot-196]: El original dice: *A kulaki,* literalmente *¡Y los kulaks! Como* se sabe, los kulaks eran los propietarios que se caracterizaban, en el siglo XIX, por oprimir como usureros a los campesinos pobres. Ver en el cap. XXXIII la referencia a las actividades usurarias de Kaloméitsev y, en el cap. XXXV, a un campesino que se suicida por su culpa.

Comentario [Librodot-197]: En Francia, después de la revolución de 1830, los legitimistas eran los partidarios de la restauración de la monarquía Bourbon, representada por Chambord, nieto de Carlos X.

Comentario [Librodot-198]: Se refiere a la guerra francoprusiana de 187071, que empezó el 14 de julio de 1870 y terminó con la derrota de Francia.

Librodot

especulaciones sobre el futuro olvidaste nuestra religión y su influencia... Y, además -se apresuró a añadir-, la señorita Mashúrina no te escucha... ¡Sería mejor que le ofrecieras más té!

Paklin volvió en sí.

-Ah, sí, querida... ¿otra taza?

Pero Mashúrina fijó lentamente en él sus ojos oscuros y dijo, pensativa:

-Quería preguntarle, Paklin, si por acaso no tiene un dibujo cualquiera de Nezhdánov... ¿o una foto?

-Tengo una foto, sí..., incluso bastante buena. Está en aquel cajón. Voy a traerla.

Empezó a rebuscar en el cajón, mientras Snandulia se acercó a Mashúrina y, con una mirada larga y fija de simpatía, le apretó la mano como a un camarada.

-¡La tengo! ¡La encontré! -exclamó Paklin. Y le entregó la foto. Mashúrina se la metió en el bolsillo rápidamente, casi sin mirarla y, sin dar las gracias, aunque ruborizándose, cogió el sombrero, se puso la capa y se dirigió a la puerta.

-¿Se marcha? -preguntó Paklin-. ¡Dígame por lo menos donde vive!

-Vivo donde estoy en cada momento.

-Comprendo. No quiere que lo sepa. Pero dígame todavía una cosa, por favor: ¿aún recibe órdenes de Vasili Nikoláievich?

-¿Qué le importa?

-¿O ahora es otro... Sídor Sídorich quizá?

Mashúrina no contestó.

-¿O ahora es un anónimo?

Mashúrina ya había traspasado la puerta.

-¡Quizá un anónimo!

La puerta se cerró con un golpe seco.

Paklin se quedó largo rato, inmóvil, ante aquella puerta cerrada.

-¡La Rusia anónima! -dijo por fin.

FIN